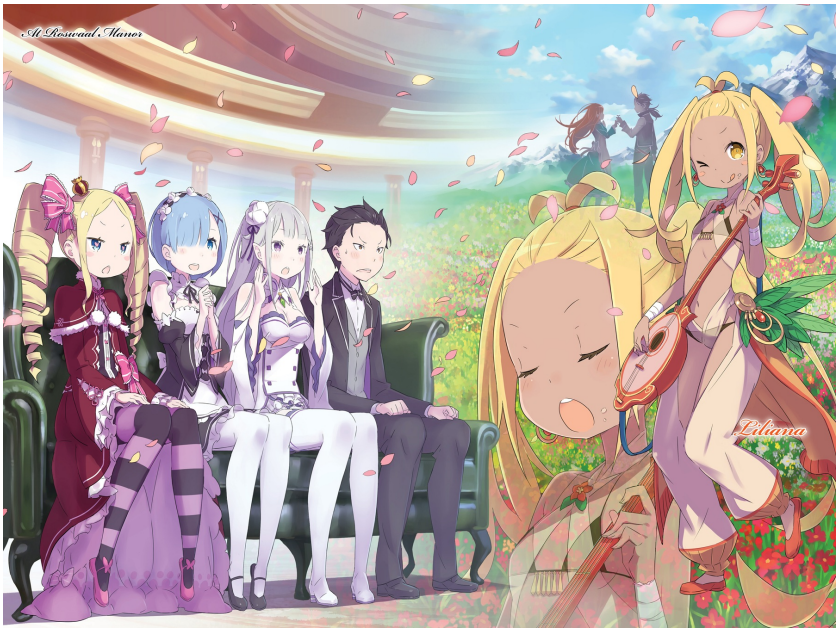
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION 1
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION
1


At Roswaal Manor
Liliana

Rem & Subaru

EMILIA IN WONDERLAND

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

CONTENTS

A Heroic Epic Starting from Zero
Original Publication:
Monthly Comic Alive, Vol. 96–98

The Head Maid's Restless Day of Rest
Original Publication:
Monthly Comic Alive, Vol. 100

The Day I Stopped Being the Aldebaran Star

Emilia in Wonderland

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION

VOLUME 1

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Re:ZERO Short Story Collection Vol. 1
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

Translation by Sarah Moon
Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Re:ZERO KARA HAJIMERU ISEKAI SEIKATSU TANPENSHU Vol. 1
©Tappei Nagatsuki 2014
First published in Japan in 2014 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights reserved by YEN PRESS, LLC under the license from KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: August 2024
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Ivan Liang
Designed by Yen Press Design: Jane Sohn, Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9251-2 (paperback)
978-1-9753-9252-9 (ebook)

E3-20240730-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

A Heroic Epic Starting from Zero
The Head Maid's Restless Day of Rest
The Day I Stopped Being the Aldebaran Star
Emilia in Wonderland

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

A HEROIC EPIC STARTING FROM ZERO

1

"There's a traveling *bard* in the village?"

A look of astonishment crossed Subaru Natsuki's face as he repeated the unexpected word. He turned around, cleaning rag in hand, seeming rather awkward in the butler's uniform he was wearing today (as per usual). The awkward movements he made while washing the window could be chalked up to his lingering injuries from the day before.

Demon beasts had paid a visit to Marquis Roswaal's manor and the nearest village, Earlham—a crisis that ultimately ended with few casualties, one of them being Subaru, who had earned more than a few painful badges of honor.

With the recent chaos well behind them, life in Roswaal Manor and Earlham Village had largely returned to normal. Subaru's injuries were mostly healed, and he was starting to help out with chores again, partly as a form of rehabilitation.

"That's right—a bard! I overheard Ram talking about it when she came back from the village earlier. Have you ever seen a bard, Subaru?"

The girl who answered Subaru had a charming, silvery voice and long, silvery hair. She was so confoundingly beautiful that it wouldn't seem strange if artists everywhere broke their brushes out of frustration. But one look at her enchanting violet eyes, brimming with curiosity, or the unmasked excitement burning in her pink cheeks, and that frustration would quickly be replaced by adoration.

Subaru certainly thought so, especially during these moments of childlike mirth she had from time to time.

"E M T (Emilia-tan's a Major Treasure)."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

The confused girl's name was Emilia, Subaru's savior and his

heart's desire.

He laughed at the innocent way she cocked her head and said, "Nah, I haven't seen a bard myself…but you look super excited, Emilia-tan."

"I don't *look* excited—I am excited. Bards sing, dance, and tell stories, don't they? So this bard probably knows all sorts of stories… Hey, Subaru?"

Emilia clasped her hands together and gazed hopefully at Subaru. The sweet way she called his name, the sparkle in her eyes looking up at him—no man alive could possibly say no to a request from a girl as beautiful as Emilia. At the very least, Subaru couldn't.

"Okay, I hear you. I'll wrap things up here and ask permission to go."

"Sorry to bother you for such a selfish reason."

"Nah, it's all good. I doubt anyone expects a lump on the mend like me to do much cleaning anyway, so our date takes priority."

"Ah, that's right. Since we'll be going out somewhere together…I suppose this would be considered a date."

With a glance at Emilia—who was blissfully unaware of the sinful beauty of her smile—Subaru dropped his cleaning rag back in a bucket of water and left the room. Through the windows in the hallway, he could see Earlham Village in the distance.

"A bard, huh…"

No word evoked fantasy-world vibes more than *bard*. While he had contained his excitement in front of Emilia, his heart was already racing.

A bard's cheerful singing voice spun stories of worlds and the people who inhabited them. As Subaru walked down the hallway alone, his anticipation grew with every eager step.

2

“And now, lend me your ears, and I’ll sing you a song—‘The Draffin Betrayed by the Setting Sun.’”

A dark, tragic melody fell on the village square like early summer rain. In the center of the square, atop a crude stage of stacked wooden boards, stood a performer strumming a stringed instrument that resembled a guitar or a ukulele.

The symmetrical instrument warbled with a lively timbre, but the nearly palpable melancholy in the air was a testament to the musician’s technique. The mood in the village square was spectacularly dark.

Drawn by the gloomy melody and the captivating lyrics, the villagers came to the square, their eyes all distant. In the crowd were several old ladies whose eyes were swollen from mourning the end of the world. Even in the bleakest moments of the demon beast attack, none of them looked as dreadful as they did now.

“If life must be so painful, then I would rather die. But I cannot die. I’m not allowed to die…”

In the story, Draffin was betrayed by his closest friend and fiancée. He stood on the bridge where they had once exchanged a solemn vow, and as the light of the setting sun illuminated him, he pondered flinging himself off the edge and ending it all.

Despite the fact that she was singing and playing an instrument, the bard’s posture and gestures gave the performance an incredible sense of realism, immersing her listeners in the story. When a lone tear rolled down her cheek, no one in the audience could hold back any longer. Some even started to wail and whimper.

“Bubbles bursting from his lungs, he sinks to the quiet river floor. O, Draffin. O, O, Draffin…”

As Draffin surrendered to his darkest impulse and reached the bottom of the river, the helpless wind and flowers mourned his tragic death. And then the curtain fell—

“Geez, could you *pick* a more depressing song?!”

Before the bard’s last note died out, Subaru butted in with a one-liner out of sheer frustration.

“Eep!”

The Bard of Bad Ends gave a start—and the story world encapsulating the square came crashing down. The villagers snapped back to their senses and exchanged glances.

"Oh! Um…" "Yikes, why'm I crying?" "Oh dear, the floodgates open so easily with age…" "Draffin, you're just like me!" "That bard girl is really cute!"

With tears in their eyes, everyone in the crowd started sharing their thoughts on the performance. And after they got that off their chests, they turned to look at the back row, where Subaru was trying to sneak out—

"Thanks for killing the mood, Subaru!"

—and they yelled so angrily that Subaru also jumped in surprise.

3

"Allow me to introduce myself again. I am Liliana, a traveling bard!"

There was still a hint of childishness in the way she bowed her head. Her vibrant, curious eyes and her yellow hair matched her fiery personality. Her pigtails, thin cloak, and dancer's garb were all adorned with decorations made from tree nuts and animal bones. She was short in stature, but her limbs were long, and her skin was tan and healthy. Everything about her exuded *wanderer*.

"Well, pleased to meet you. I'm Subaru Natsuki, an uproarious, baroque handyman. I am the jack-of-all-chores making waves at that manor you see beyond yonder road."

"Upper or he us…? Broke handyman…? Er—I mean, hello! Yes, it is very nice to meet you."

Even with a stranger, Subaru steamrolled the conversation. His social graces were distinctly *un*gracious. Liliana forced her dubious frown beneath a fake smile, desperately trying not to offend the people who had just introduced themselves as associates of the local lord.

But Liliana's guard was quickly shattered.

"That song you just sang was *really* good! Even now, I feel like I might cry…" Overcome with emotion, Emilia grabbed Liliana's hand and gushed. Her enthusiasm took Liliana aback at first, but she quickly smiled when she realized she was being complimented.

"Ohh, thank you! It is an honor to have such an attentive

listener! I am still far from perfect, but hearing such praise is more than enough to— *Hweh?!*"

Liliana returned Emilia's enthusiasm with a smile at first…but when the bard got a good look at her admirer, her jaw dropped, and she froze.

Subaru's party looked at her with surprise as Liliana murmured, her eyes still in a daze, "A-are you a goddess…?"

"Er—pardon?"

"I—I mean—I never seen such a girl as *purty* as you! My oh my! That hair, that skin—how did ya get 'em like that?! You even *human*?!"

She bounced in a circle around Emilia, fawning over her beauty. The extreme reaction paralyzed Emilia for a moment, but Subaru couldn't agree with Liliana's assessment more. Emilia was a little too oblivious of her otherworldly beauty (though that was part of her charm).

Then Liliana abruptly stopped, grabbed her instrument, and bowed. "The muse has spoken! I present to you my new song —'Ohhh My Goddess.'"

Liliana took a quiet breath before her feet began stomping a quiet rhythm. Then her delicate fingertips strummed a new melody.

"Deeply bewitching are you, shining like a treasure's gentle hue, your gaze—a cavern of violet gemstones twinkling through. Your silvery hair, flowing like tears of the moon in pain. Your delicate face, carved by an artisan's hand unrestrained. Your skin, white like fresh fallen snow, knows not the feel of a trampling boot. Pointed and long, your ears… Your ears… Your ears—*?"*

"_____!"

Liliana's flowing song abruptly stopped. Subaru watched as her golden eyes filled with doubt, then realization, then shock.

She quickly connected the dots in her own lyrics. "Silvery hair and pointed ears… You…youse the *Witch of Jealousy*!"

Subaru clamped a hand on Liliana's mouth. "Okay, cut! That was a nice song, but we have reason to believe it's violated copyright! Once we conduct a formal investigation, we shall issue a statement, so please forget any interactions you've had with our firm and—"

"Subaru."

Naturally, it was Emilia who put a stop to this desperate attempt at a cover-up. She shot a frown at Subaru, who was

currently restraining Liliana with a joint lock.

"I appreciate your concern, Subaru, but you should know it's wrong to attack a girl like that! *Bad* Subaru!"

"What am I, a dog…? I mean, don't be like this, Emilia-tan."

"It's okay, Subaru. Trying to hide the truth isn't the answer."

Emilia was bold and firm, but the same couldn't be said for Subaru. Seeing her become the victim of undeserved condemnation made his heart ache.

Emilia was born from the union of an elf and a human—in other words, she was a half-elf. This world was filled with all sorts of people who weren't human, but some were objects of prejudice—half-elves in particular. Because of this, Emilia experienced a great deal of hardship.

Emilia may have forgiven Liliana, but Subaru couldn't ignore her words—words that had shackled Emilia for so long. Reluctantly, he released the girl's wrists and elbows, then freed her shoulders and arms.

"Pfah! My arms! My arms! *Please* don't break my moneymakers! I's just a young maiden with soft silky skin—hands off, *chore boy*!"

"I was just using everything in my power to protect those important to me—that's the kind of man I want to be. Also, sorry to inform you, missy, but of all the 'soft silky skin' I've encountered, yours comes nearly dead last."

The ratio of beautiful girls was abnormally high in this world, but Liliana's feminine charms ranked (according to Subaru) somewhere near the bottom. Dead last was Beatrice, second to last was Felt, and Liliana probably took the third-worst prize.

"*Humphie!* First, you immobilize me, then you wound my delicate heart! Butbutbut!"

Though resentful of Subaru's criticisms, Liliana danced before Emilia with the insolence of a rat. Emilia's expression stiffened under the tiny girl's stare. And then—

"Not only are you beautiful, but you're also dignified at your core. You made my heart go *thwomp*!"

"Er, oh. Okay—did I?"

"Yes, milady! I must humbly apologize for my boorish impertinence earlier. If your chore boy hadn't stopped me, my family would disown me for such outrageous behavior!"

"Oh, I see now. You're a *disaster-bard*!"

Subaru was astonished by her impulsively brazen admission of

guilt, but Liliana just cheerfully began to strum her instrument.

"I may not look it, but my senses are razor-sharp. If the muse of inspiration flashes before my eyes, then impatience simply eats away at me! Which is why the racial reasons that forbade me to speak openly of Lady Emilia's beauty and courage compounded into a jumbled soup of crazy!"

"Dang, you're like a breath of fresh air. Don't see your type much in this world."

Liliana's needless enthusiasm was loud, but oddly enough, it wasn't unpleasant. Her sincerity and voice were to thank for that. The bard's beautiful voice tickled hearts and wormed inside her listeners in a way that was surely innate. It dawned on Subaru that performing was indeed her calling.

"Either that, or her calling is selling duvets and water purifiers to old people," Subaru muttered in awe.

"What—what—*what*? Just going off vibes here, but I *feel* like I was just insulted!" Liliana responded dramatically, but Subaru smoothly ignored it.

Now that Subaru was relaxed and no longer actively hostile, Emilia smiled at the freewheeling girl and said, "I appreciate the compliments, but I don't think I'm that beautiful."

"Hey! *Hey!* Just now? A feeling I *cannot* abide as a woman *exploded* inside me! The muse has spoken. I present you with my new song—'Ohhh My Damn Goddess.'"

"Shut up! But, Emilia-tan, I really do think you need to do something about that mentality of yours!"

With Subaru and Liliana both disagreeing wholeheartedly, all Emilia could do was tilt her head down awkwardly, a look of disbelief on her face.

4

Looking back, the first morning Subaru was invited to the dining hall for breakfast, he was plagued with anxiety and nervousness. He couldn't help but think about it as he sipped his tea in the drawing room at Roswaal Manor. His thoughts on the flavor were the same as always—overbrewed and unpleasant.

"What's wrong, Subaru? You're making a *really* peculiar face."

As Subaru dwelled on bitter memories and strong tea, Emilia called out to him.

“I was just reminiscing a little. You remember how I used to be in my shell when I first came to this manor?”

“Were you? But, Subaru, weren’t you boldly leering your first morning here just as you are now?”

“‘*Leering*’? That makes me sound insanely suspicious!”

Their wildly different takes on the matter made Subaru’s jaw drop. When Emilia saw Subaru scratch his cheek anxiously, she put a finger to her lip and said, “Just kidding. You looked like you were deep in thought, so I wanted to tease you a little.”

“You for real? Well, that’s a serious case of E M A (Emilia-tan’s a Major Airhead)!”

“Yeah, yeah. And you too, Liliana. You really don’t need to be so nervous.” Subaru’s flippant reply went unheeded as Emilia was more focused on reassuring Liliana, who was shrinking into a little ball across from her. Forgetting her cheerfulness back at the village, the bard jolted up, her face pale, as she squeaked, “Okay.”

“Whoa, *somebody’s* freaking out. What happened to all that confidence?”

“Y-you might think different, but *of course* I’m nervous. A c-country bumpkin like me suddenly got whisked away to the lord’s manor…the manor of a marquis to boot… Wh-what if I screw up…?”

“They’ll wipe out your whole family line and won’t stop there—even the land they live on won’t be spared. Scorched earth. A dog’s death.”

Right when Liliana’s nerves couldn’t get any worse, Subaru drew a thumb across his throat to drive the point home. Liliana looked like she was going to be sick, and Emilia immediately slapped Subaru’s knee.

“Subaru, that’s enough!” Emilia scolded, her cheeks puffed.

“Sorry, my bad. Didn’t think she’d take the joke that badly,” Subaru sheepishly apologized. Still, Subaru was secretly satisfied to see the lost-kitty look in Liliana’s eyes considering everything she’d put him through in the village square.

After Subaru and the others returned from Earlham Village, they occupied the Roswaal Manor’s drawing room for a friendly—rather, an *uncomfortable* chat. They were waiting for the master of the house to be free to receive their guest. That was how the trio came to be awkwardly seated on the sofas.

“But hey, did you see the sour look on Ram’s face when she met

us? It felt like we were parasites, bringing a big bag of pestilence with us."

"Eep! So I really *am* unwelcome… Er, I'd better escape while I still can…!"

"Liliana, it's all right. Subaru, stop making her uncomfortable. Don't you feel sorry for her?"

"I wasn't trying to freak her out; I'm just telling her the facts. Chances are Ram actually *is* unhappy that she has more work to do now."

Ram was a maid who had a special relationship with Roswaal and a haughty attitude that seemed out of place given her profession. When they asked her to be the go-between to get Liliana into Roswaal Manor, she'd heaved a not-so-subtle sigh after one glance at the bard.

There was little doubt that she was seething with resentment while speaking to her master now about the guest.

"There's no telling what terrible reviews Roswaal is hearing about Liliana this very moment. For all we know, he thinks a towering giant with a raspy voice is here for an audience."

Not even the infamously eccentric Roswaal would chance meeting with somebody of dubious value to him. And what a shame it would be if that was what dashed Liliana's hopes.

"Don't worry, my sister is not that unfair. She would not prioritize her feelings when seeking Master Roswaal's opinion."

Subaru's concerns were addressed by a blue-haired girl carrying a steaming teapot. This beautiful girl, dressed in a provocative maid's uniform that exposed part of her back, chest, and shoulders, was named Rem. She had come to gracefully set down a selection of sweets and refill empty teacups. Subaru held out his cup, bringing it closer to Rem and the waiting teapot.

"Sweets are one thing, but I always thought of pouring tea as Ram's job."

"Well, she has been quite busy lately. Besides…I wish to prepare the tea when you drink it, Subaru. Your Rem can fill the tea with her feelings…and other things."

Her bold declaration made Subaru flinch. "For the love of all that's holy, *please* stick with tea leaves and hot water!"

Rem pouted slightly and muttered, "If you insist."

Ever since the trouble with the demon beasts had ended, Rem's attitude toward Subaru had improved dramatically. He appreciated

her newfound affection, but it also deeply confused his fragile boyish heart. Neither he nor anyone around him realized this was the typical reaction of a boy who had never been popular with the ladies.

"Well, we supposedly invited her for some tasty snacks and tea. Technically, we made good on that promise."

"Oh please, Subaru… If you tell me my tea and sweets are tasty and what a pretty maid I am—I'm blushing," Rem protested, pressing her hands to rosy cheeks.

"Everything you said is true, but did you just sneak in an extra compliment there?" Subaru couldn't resist pointing that out.

With a shy giggle, Rem quietly said, "Also…I heard she was an ordinary bard. Why did you bring her here?"

Subaru whispered back, "Ohhh, right. Emilia-tan took a liking to her, and— Well, actually, it's a bit complicated. I dunno how she did it, but she saw through Emilia-tan's Block Identification."

Rem's eyes narrowed slightly when she heard this. Block Identification was a spell woven into the robe Emilia wore in public to hide her half-elf features. Without Emilia's express permission or the ability to overcome the magic cast on the robe, nobody should have been able to tell who Emilia was.

"You say she saw through it, but…Master Roswaal wove that spell in himself. It's hard to believe anybody could do such a thing."

"Right? That's why we had her come here with us. We couldn't just leave her there."

They had used Ram's tea and Rem's sweets as a pretense for taking her to the manor. Liliana had been reluctant, but she'd obediently taken the bait when it was offered. On a certain level, Subaru was terribly concerned for the girl's future if she was always this gullible.

In any case, this wasn't a matter they could ignore, so Subaru and the others brought the bard back to the manor.

"I understand," Rem said. "In other words, we should silence her before she has the chance to say anything, yes?"

"You don't understand crap. Look, phrases like 'we should silence her' sound way too real coming from you!"

"Oh please, Subaru, your Rem would never stoop so low."

Rem jokingly stuck out her tongue…but prior circumstances meant this wasn't at all convincing. (To be fair, those *prior circumstances* only existed in a fragment of Subaru's memory.)

“Man, your sweets are like a miracle drug, Rem,” Subaru said.

No matter how stiff and nervous she’d been initially, the moment Liliana helped herself to one of the fragrant baked treats, there was no room in her mind for anything else. Rem was undeniably skilled at housework, but her true gift was baking.

“Lemme have a taste… Oh yeah. These are awesome, Rem.”

“Thank you so much, Subaru! I poured my heart and soul into these snacks… I gave it my all…so that I would be at peace if I could never bake ever again.”

“It’s just baking. Do you treat it like a fight to the death every time?!”

As Subaru savored Rem’s magnum opus, he shuddered a little when she practically declared it a matter of life and death.

Meanwhile, Liliana leaned back into the sofa’s soft embrace, settling into a comfortable position and rubbing her belly.

“Mmm… Zzzzz…”

“Okay, I like to think of myself as a hospitable guy, but not enough to let you go to sleep on me!”

“Ah! I’m not asleep! Not asleep, I swear! I was only *pretending* to sleep, to lure the assassins targeting me to come out of hiding so I can take them out in one fell swoop!”

“…What?! Oh no! Is somebody trying to kill you…?”

“Now look at what you’ve done! You’ve tricked our sheltered angel!”

A jumble of excuses fell out of Liliana’s mouth, and Emilia, trusting as she was, took them at face value. As Liliana wiped a string of drool from the corner of her mouth, Subaru mused that perhaps she was a girl of extremes, someone who could only respond with zero or a hundred. A sigh escaped him as he realized she wasn’t going to be an easy person to watch over.

Then Rem surprised everyone and changed the subject. “I hear you are a bard.”

As Rem looked at Liliana’s instrument leaning against the sofa —her lyulyre—the performer grabbed her instrument, hugged it close, and stammered nervously, “Y-yes! Apologies, I’m but a reckless dream-chaser who seeks to challenge the world with a single string of my lyulyre!”

“You really will grovel for anyone who seems like they’re in charge, won’t you?!” Subaru exclaimed.

Liliana’s submissive attitude was almost refreshing, but Rem

ignored this and clapped her hands. The sparkle in her light-blue eyes was much like Emilia's the first time she heard Liliana sing.

"Then I suppose you know several famous stories, yes?" Rem asked.

"_____! Yes…yes! I most certainly do!" Liliana's eyes blazed as she strummed her lyulyre. "I set out on my own over a decade ago, and this lyulyre is how I make my living. With it, I drive people mad with passion, drag them into vortexes of chaos, and bring them to tears in the streets—that's my specialty!"

"Whoa, hold up! You've been at this on your own for over a decade? How old *are* you?!"

"I'm twenty-one this year. Why?"

"Twenty-one? With those looks and that brain of yours?!"

She had a baby face and was rather lacking in the chest, butt, and hips department. Subaru thought it was rather embarrassing to wear such revealing clothes when there wasn't much to show off, but now that he knew her age, he felt even worse for her.

Subaru sighed. "She's basically a legal Lolita, but let's put a pin in that for now… Besides, it's not like I haven't seen a more outrageous example…"

"Oh, shut up! Just so you know, I'm quite popular among certain crowds. But more importantly!"

After pushing past Subaru (who was somewhere between sympathetic and awestruck), Liliana returned Rem's eager gaze. Her lyulyre firmly in hand, she raised one foot onto the sofa and struck a pose.

"Now! Let me make your wishes come true. What would you like? Which famous tale do you fancy? If, for example, you seek a timeless masterpiece, then how about the 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil'?!"

"Now that's an intimidating song title…"

"How dare you! The 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil' is a modern masterpiece sung not only in Lugunica, but other nations as well! The romance of the awkward yet devoted warrior has made many a fair maiden weak in the knees, yearning to be loved in the same way!"

"R-really…?"

"Why, yes, of course! Especially in the very last verse, when the devil crosses swords with none other than his beloved and the ensuing battle bewitches all who behold it—I cannot sing that part

without crying!"

"That's not romance—that's murder!"

The synopsis made it sound like a bloodbath. The enemies-to-lovers trope wasn't unheard of in Subaru's former world, but he wasn't very familiar with stuff like *Love of Kill*. (It was just a title that came to mind and not much beyond that.)

"What are you talking about, Subaru?" Rem protested. "The 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil' is one of Lugunica's most famous songs. I've heard it quite a few times myself."

"For real?! You serious?! Emilia-tan, don't tell me it made *you* weak in the knees, too?"

"Er—I'm sorry, but I don't know much about this subject, so I probably can't give you the answer you want."

"No, no, that's the perfect answer! That's exactly what I hoped you'd say, Emilia-tan!"

If anything, this only convinced Subaru that Rem's tastes were shockingly unconventional. While the trio clamored, Liliana appeared to be searching through her mental songbook.

"I can also perform other songs, like 'Volakia's Blue Lightning,' 'Monument on Sword Hill,' and more. And don't forget the anthem of Kararagi's founding father that's become synonymous with hitting it big time—'Hoshin of the Wasteland.'"

"Wow, eclectic. Still, aren't a lot of them about great historical figures? Or is that just the sort of song you like to add to your collection?"

"It's partly a matter of personal taste, true, but the masses also love heroic epics and biographies of great historical figures. Everyone yearns for a spectacle. I just take it a step further and paint these tales with music."

Her cheeks dyed pink with shyness, Liliana confessed a pillar of her mission to the room. She seemed to expect Subaru to laugh it off, but he shook his head and said, "That's a noble calling, especially at your age— Wait, I just remembered. You're twenty-one."

"This is going to sound harsh, but why does a *chore boy* like you have a problem with my age? If you keep badgering me, I'll take you to court."

"Does this world even *have* that kind of court…?"

Ignorant of the ways of this world, Subaru did not know the answer to his question.

“So if I’m hearing you correctly, miss—your mission is to travel the world and share songs about famous heroes from history?” Rem asked.

Liliana pulled herself together and answered, “Noooo, it’s so much more than that. Of course, I do consider sharing songs to be my sacred task, but I have a more personal goal. And that’s…”

But before she could elaborate, the bard was cut short.

“Sorry to intrude on your conversation…”

There was a knock at the door. It opened to reveal a maid who politely bowed her head. She was the spitting image of Rem, except with pink hair and light-red eyes. The maid—Ram—looked up and graciously said, “Apologies for the wait. Master Roswaal is ready to see his guest.”

5

“’Tis I! Roswaal L Mathers, marquis of the Kingdom of Lugunica and master of this fiiine house!”

“……”

As Liliana beheld the man sitting across from her introducing himself, she lost her voice and calcified into a statue. Subaru shot a sympathetic glance her way. He couldn’t blame her for feeling intimidated—a marquis was one of the higher-ranking nobles, and they had introduced her to one without warning. It would have already been a nerve-racking situation, but all the more so with *this* marquis—

“I doubt she expected she was going to meet an absolute weirdo in clown makeup.”

“Barusu—such insolence against Master Roswaal shall *not* be tolerated. We’ll tighten the screws on you.”

“The fact that you knew I was talking about Rozchi makes you just as guilty as me. Also, tighten the screws on *what* exactly?”

“What, indeed…?” Any pretense of politeness vanished when Ram shot Subaru a chilling glare.

Meanwhile, Roswaal leisurely reclined on the leather sofa beside her and crossed his legs. He was blessed with a perfect body and a prestigious title, but he ruined it all with his quirky personality and appearance. Despite this, he was still highly regarded as a lord. Anyone who met him in person for the first time would surely have a terrible time processing the gap between the

man and the reputation that preceded him.

"Oooh, yeees. The surprised look on a visitor's face the first time they see me is always my greatest joy. Subaru's reactions aren't baaad, either, but this sort of reaction really hits the spot. Wouldn't you say, Subaru?"

"Could you not drag me into this? Unlike you, toying with people isn't my idea of a good time. Only a small part of my personality is that twisted."

The truth was Subaru really did take a particular satisfaction in rubbing people the wrong way. To an outside observer, Subaru was little different from Roswaal, but both thought they were better than the other. They were a lost cause.

"I am t-terribly and frightfully delighted to be g-granted an audience with you, my lord. I am b-but a lowly bard, Liliana. I hope that my visit finds you in high spirits."

"Oh-ho. Well said, my dear. To speak so beautifully under such emotional strain—now I know I agreed to see you for goooood reason. Fear not, my dear. My magnanimous nature is weeeell-known around these parts."

Though Roswaal's speech was quite self-congratulatory, every word of it was true. If he was a run-of-the-mill short-tempered evil nobleman, Subaru's head would have said good-bye to his shoulders upon their very first meeting.

Emilia explained to Roswaal, "We heard there was a bard in the village, so Subaru and I went to see her. She told us she was searching for unique stories, and we thought you might be able to help her."

"Ahaaa, now I see. Well, if you have such high hopes for her, Emilia, then I suppose it would behooooove me to share a little of my powers that I usually keep hidden."

With a light chuckle, Roswaal leaned back. The sofa creaked beneath him as he folded his arms and closed his eyes in thought. After a few moments, he opened his one yellow eye and stared at Liliana. Under his bewitching gaze, the bard shivered.

"Oooh, no need to be frightened, my dear. I aaam your friend. Since Emilia has decided to make you a friend, I simply must make eeevery effort to do the same!"

"Hwokay. Tha…tha-tha-thank you muchly."

"But my goodness, a bard. A bard… What impeeeeeccable timing!"

As Liliana cowered in fear, Roswaal's smile deepened. Subaru had a bad feeling about the marquis's red-lipped smile. He had to be scheming something.

"Liliana—that's your name, riiiight? Well, Liliana, your wish—I have the power to make it come true. However, I would appreciate a liiiiitle more information before I comply."

"M-more information, my lord? I don't know where to begin…"

"Yes, let me see… What is the aim of your quest? Frankly, thaaaat is what I wish to know."

When she heard Roswaal's voice deepen, Liliana's tense expression changed dramatically.

She closed her eyes in thought for a moment, then when her eyes reopened, they looked directly into Roswaal's as she answered, "—I travel the world in search of the newest legends."

It didn't matter that she was talking to one of the most powerful people in the kingdom. The determined light in Liliana's eyes never wavered. The words *newest legends* reverberated in Subaru's heart. He was, after all, a man. It was obvious those powerful words would set his heart ablaze.

"The newest legends…," Emilia murmured.

"That's right. That is why I travel—to find these newest legends so I can sing about them."

There was a devilish tone in Liliana's voice. A devilishness that seeped into the hearts of anyone who heard it. Liliana nodded quietly at Emilia, noticing how hard it had struck her. Then she picked up her instrument and strummed it.

"We bards make a living from our songs. Our songs sink deep into the hearts of the masses, etching true stories of the past—of history—onto their souls. Songs with a long history hold a power in them—a power that remains in this world long after their songwriters die."

Liliana continued to explain in a clear voice. Nobody dared interrupt.

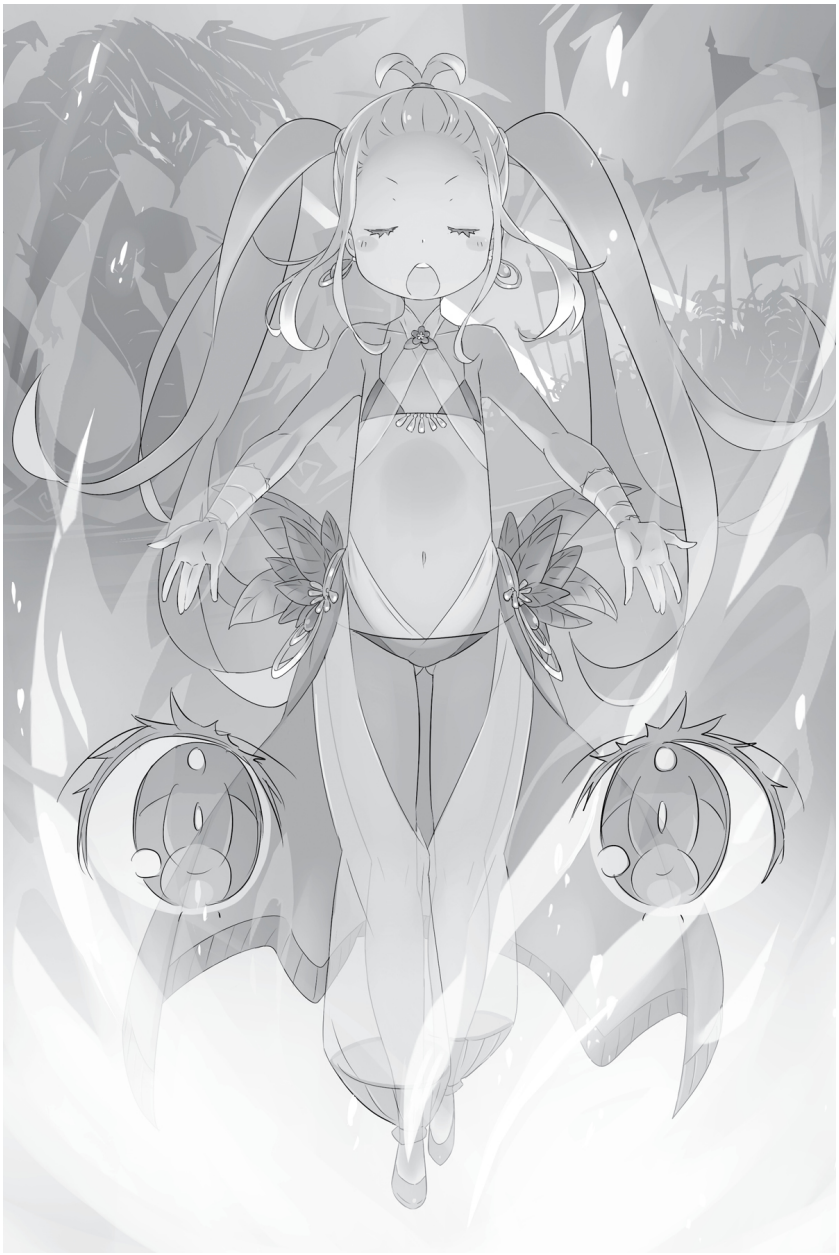
"My people are unable to leave anything tangible behind. We don't build things, and we don't write. We instinctually resist setting down roots. We wander the earth on our own two feet, singing wherever we arrive, and once our songs touch the hearts of the people who call that place home, we set out in search of a new land. We do this again and again until one day, alone in an empty wasteland, we meet our end, cradling our instruments in our arms.

That is who we are."

In her voice, in her words, in her eyes, in her gestures—there was a power. It was the same power that came out in her singing.

"And because we can't leave anything tangible behind, all that remains of us resides in the hearts of people. That is why we yearn to create art that will stay with our audiences. We want to leave behind proof that we lived, etching our spirits into history. If there is anything I desire, it's that glory and nothing more."

Though she was not singing, something in her words echoed in Subaru's soul in a way that rivaled music. Liliana's perspective on life was clearly defined. Almost tragically so. Nobody in the room could find the words to speak, not even Subaru.



It would have been easy to dismiss Liliana's mission as stubborn and haughty. But that would be a refutation of Liliana and every bard like her. Subaru didn't have any right or reason to judge Liliana's way of life.

"Aha, iiiiinteresting… So that is why you're hunting for new legends."

The one who finally broke the silence was Roswaal. He praised her grit and nodded in understanding as a man who had made more tough decisions than anybody else in the room.

Acknowledging Roswaal's nod of approval, Liliana sat up straight and said, "History is a vibrant tapestry as strong as it is long, passed down through generations in people's hearts. We bards take great pride in devoting our lives to inheriting and preserving these songs. However…if it's possible, I want to be the first. I want to be the first to perform a new song that will live on forever in people's hearts. I want to share the latest and most dazzling historic moments this world has to offer with my throat, my tongue, my song—that is my wish."

"……Oh."

That was why Liliana had said the *newest legends*. Nobody had sung about them yet. Nobody even knew about them yet, but they were still a page of world history. Turning these legends into song was what motivated her to wander aimlessly, despite the lonely death awaiting her. Her dearest wish was to accomplish her true calling.

"Your quest is a nooooble one. But exactly what kind of folklore do you seek? Chasing after something intangible is like trying to catch a cloud. Unless your intangible yearning has a tangible shape within your heart, you maaaay lose sight of your true desire."

"What I truly desire, if possible…is to write a hero's epic."

"A hero's epic…"

Roswaal's question. Liliana's answer. Emilia's dazed murmur. The meaning behind their three reactions and the distinct ring of *hero's epic* tantalized Subaru. Those were electrifying words that danced in every soul and had the power to inspire passion that bordered on madness.

Even in Subaru's original world, most famous historical figures who made names for themselves were war heroes. In any world, in

any era, a hero's epic had the power to captivate the hearts of all.

"Then I suppose that means you wish to hear new heroic tales, Liliana?" Emilia asked.

"I know that's no easy task…a new hero's tale in this day and age. If you went back several centuries, to when witches ran rampant and the world was overflowing with danger, that was a time for heroes to be born…but now, when the world is mostly at peace, new heroes are hard to come by."

There was little room for heroes in peacetime. A world without heroes was a world that did not prioritize heroes. Liliana seemed to understand this, and it took everything in her to suppress her agony over the unsolvable problem.

However…

"…Tantalizing."

It was a quiet murmur, but it reached every ear in the room. Confusion clouded Subaru's face. He didn't understand what could have inspired that kind of reaction. Paying the boy no heed, Roswaal broke into a smile as his heterochromatic eyes opened wide.

"A bard who wishes to discover an unknown hero's epic has come to our land. Whaaaat other word could express such a fateful encounter other than *tantalizing*? Oh my, oh my—how utterly taaaaantalizing!"

"Roswaal, please. What are you talking about?" Emilia chided the merry Roswaal. "You're confusing everyone, Liliana especially. Don't keep it to yourself—please explain."

"Oh, it's quite simple, Emilia. I am sure Miss Liliana shall accomplish her dream."

"What?! W-wait, so does that mean you have a new hero in mind?"

"But of course I do. And this new hero has a connection with *you*, Emilia."

"With me…?" Emilia asked Roswaal blankly.

He gave her a meaningful smile. That was when Subaru suddenly realized what Roswaal was implying. And if his hunch was right, that meant he knew the new legend Roswaal wanted Liliana to find.

"You know of a new hero's epic, Marquis? Then please, won't you tell me—?!"

"Oops, I can't tell you juuuust yet."

“Meep!”

Liliana was animated by the prospect of drawing near her goal, but Roswaal mercilessly dashed that hope. As Liliana let out a crushing wail of grief, Emilia glared at the marquis and snapped, “Roswaal!”

“Don’t be so cross. That’s no way to treat such a pretty face. Besides, I most certainly did not mean to torment Liliana. Do I really seem that villainous?”

“If anything like that does happen, I always suspect you and Subaru first.”

“Slander!” Subaru cried.

As a stray round struck Subaru, Emilia waved her hands and frantically stammered, “No, I didn’t mean it like that!”

After Emilia’s clumsy attempt at an apology, the defeated Liliana looked up at Roswaal again and said, “S-so…what must I do to hear your story?”

“This new legend… Well, it’s not exactly something we can speak lightly of. So you must first proooove to us that you are somebody we can trust.”

“B-by doing what?! Y-you can’t have my hands, but I’m willing to sacrifice a toe or two as collateral!”

“Whoa, slow down. And cherish your body more, girl.” Subaru nipped Liliana’s hardcore proposal in the bud and sighed. In some ways, a traveling bard was difficult to differentiate from a common vagrant. Her sketchy origins were perhaps second only to Subaru, who’d been summoned from another world and had no family records to speak of.

Still, Roswaal had made a reasonable judgment call. If Subaru had accurately guessed what Roswaal was thinking, then it wouldn’t be smart to thoughtlessly involve Liliana.

Liliana’s shoulders slumped. The fact that her identity as a wandering bard had become the very obstacle preventing her from fulfilling the reason she was a wandering bard had to be the epitome of irony.

“In aaaany case, we will need some time to pass judgment. A proposition for you—why don’t I permit you to stay here at my manor for a few days? If we can determine whether you are trustworthy in that time frame, then I shall divulge what I know about this new hero’s epic.”

The phrase *a miracle in the eleventh hour* was for moments just

like this. It'd be perfect if Liliana wanted to put the current state of her heart into words. (Subaru did find it ironic that Roswaal was the one who lit the flame of hope in Liliana's eyes, since he was the one who had plunged her into the depths of despair to begin with.)

"U-understood, my lord! I am a woman of integrity! If you go to such lengths to offer me an opportunity, then what kind of bard would I be to refuse?! Bring it on, I say, bring it on!"

As Subaru watched the girl dance in the palm of Roswaal's hand, he had a passing thought.

Huh, Liliana might've missed her calling as a dancer.

6

"What's this…? Could it be…I was being toyed with? Is my imagination to blame?" Liliana asked.

"Uh, no. *You're* to blame," Subaru quipped.

The two were walking back toward Earlham Village.

When Subaru pointed out how ditzy Liliana was, she gave him a hurt look and said, "Wh-what a horrible thing to say! I don't think that's any way to treat a poor maiden who's devastated by the realization that she's been deceived… Don't you agree?!"

"Oh, no, Subaru is always a lovely gentleman."

"How am I supposed to deal with such blind devotion?!"

Liliana was nearly in tears after Rem disagreed politely. As Subaru watched her struggle, he sighed, realizing that his days would be quite eventful for some time.

Liliana had fallen into Roswaal's cunning trap and agreed to stay at his manor under surveillance. They were currently on the way back to Earlham Village to gather her things. On the surface, Subaru and Rem were there to help her, but really, they were there to watch over her and make sure she didn't try to escape.

Roswaal had given Subaru strict instructions not to let Liliana out of his sight, and Subaru assumed that Rem was there because he wasn't reliable. In other words, neither Subaru nor Liliana were trusted.

In reality, Subaru was reading too much into things, and Rem was merely there because she had wanted to come.

"But man, Rozchi is so mean sometimes… Not like I don't get what he's trying to do here."

"Chore boy, do you have an inkling as to what the marquis is

thinking?"

"Roughly, yeah. But for similar reasons, my lips are sealed. That's the one area where he and I agree. It does piss me off, though."

"Mrrgruff."

When she failed to get Subaru to talk, Liliana let out a cry like a mythical beast. Subaru did feel bad for her. She was so close to achieving her mission, but the thing she was searching for was nowhere to be seen.

"Look, leaving your mark on history isn't so easy," Subaru grumbled. "As for this hero's epic you're searching for, I have no idea how anybody is supposed to find history in the present."

"Exactly! It's quite hard. Ideally, I would find a hero who hasn't made a name for themselves yet, follow them around, and turn their life into a song…but without some way of seeing into the future, that's never going to happen!"

"B-bu-bu-bu-but there's no…absolutely no way you can see into the future! Dumbass!"

In a way, it wouldn't be such a stretch to describe Return by Death as peering into the future. So when the conversation seemed to touch upon his unique ability, Subaru visibly panicked. Liliana cast a suspicious glance at Subaru—but Rem intervened. She smiled, clapped her hands, and said, "Well, I have great news for you. It turns out I have a lead on this new legend."

"What?! D-do you really…?!" Liliana's face turned into a warped expression of surprise and joy over the unexpected news. Given Rem's consistently friendly demeanor, it was believable when she offered to help.

Of course, Subaru couldn't let that slide without saying anything. If Rem was thinking what Roswaal was thinking, then it would be premature to divulge that secret to Liliana. Ultimately, there was little point in worrying over what Rem would say, because she proudly smiled and pointed to the person beside her.

"It's Subaru."

"Uh—what?!"

"Here is your newest legend. The hero whose name will echo throughout history is Subaru."

Subaru and Liliana let out a dazed grunt in unison. Rem hammered her point home by pushing Subaru forward. Her recommendation was so confident that Subaru forgot to interject, *Is*

this a bit?

"It's Subaru."

Rem repeated herself again. It was hard to tell whether she was serious or whether she was engaging in subterfuge. But if nothing else, Liliana had her answer. She looked back and forth between Rem and Subaru and said, "The muse has spoken! I present you with my new song—'The New Legend of the Womanizer.'"

"Shut up!"

With a snarl at Liliana (who showed no signs whatsoever of believing Rem), Subaru heaved a loud sigh. A marquis's manservant had foreseen the disaster about to befall the village, had put his life on the line to stop the demon beasts, and had kept the villagers safe and earned their trust—who in the world would buy such a story?

"I was being serious, you know… It's sad that you don't believe me."

Judging by the way Rem's shoulders fell, she really did look sad. Subaru was starting to feel guilty. He had enough self-awareness to know he didn't deserve such pure faith.

Return by Death was Subaru's one and only special ability he had gained when he came to this new world. Even armed with that power, Subaru had failed countless times to protect the village and Roswaal Manor from tragedy.

Somebody else could have done better with this power. His self-doubt ran deep.

"No matter how you die, it always hurts the same… It'd sure be nice if I had an easier and more painless way to reload my save point."

His ability was always initiated the same way. The trigger was nothing short of death. Not only had he never asked for this power, but it also wasn't an ability he could welcome with open arms. If he ever met the supernatural being that'd bestowed him with this unwanted gift, he'd sooner punch them in the face than thank them.

Then the atmosphere took a sudden change.

"Subaru…" Rem's voice was low and filled with caution, and her hand had stretched out to bar his path. The grave tone in Rem's voice jolted Subaru out of his thoughts and back to reality. He quickly realized why Rem had gotten his attention.

"Who the hell are these guys…?" he murmured.

On the path ahead, standing between them and the village, were four silhouettes. They were clearly bad news—all of them

were swathed in white cloaks. Their faces were hidden, as were their limbs and the rest of their bodies. It was impossible to tell who they were in those white head coverings, white masks, and white costumes. The strangers were covered from head to toe in white.

"Wow, lucky me. And here I thought Roswaal was the only pervert I'd get to see today…"

Subaru made a little quip, his eyes racing over his surroundings. First, there was no sign of another band ready to attack while the four robed figures distracted them. Still, from the way they were quietly blocking the path, it was hard to mistake them for traveling performers.

"If you're lost, check your feet," Subaru told the group. "Ground without any grass is what most people call a *road*. Incidentally, the lord of this land's manor is behind us, and past you guys is a small village…"

"_____"

"Aha. So you *aren't* a lost band of travelers asking for directions," Subaru said provocatively.

The quartet answered Subaru's taunt by silently raising their long white sleeves to reveal a glimmer of sword tips. As the strangers slinked forward with their partially obscured weapons in hand, Subaru caught his breath. Without warning, all four raised their blades high, ready to strike Subaru and his stupefied party.

"I do not know who you are or where you come from, but I have deemed you hostile."

As soon as Rem finished saying that, her fist made contact with the white-hooded face at the front of the pack. With the distinct sound of something hard smashing into flesh, the stranger flew backward and crashed into the ground headfirst. Rem's victim landed face up, limbs splayed and white mask stained red.

The heinous sight made Subaru grit his teeth. He murmured, "That's gotta hurt…"

"Huh—?"

The white-robed men had just broken their silence with a grunt of disbelief. The way they recoiled after seeing what happened to their battered ally suddenly made them seem very human.

Not that it would change what was about to unfold.

"I lost my weapon in the forest the other day, so I'm afraid I shall have to fight barehanded until I find a replacement. Is that all right?"

Rem had put it rather adorably, but her misplaced weapon of choice was a demonically gargantuan spiked morning star, and her pale, thin arms belied how lethally she wielded it. There was a beauty in her martial prowess, as she had demonstrated earlier with the devastating punch.

As Rem raised her fists menacingly at the men in white, they immediately set into motion.

"Retreat!"

The men slinked away with slippery movements just like when they attacked, carrying their unconscious ally on their backs as they beat a hasty retreat. Rem's eyes followed them as they disappeared into the trees. She didn't relax until she could no longer sense their presence.

"I was a little nervous. Whenever I meet ruffians like that unarmed, I always fear I will be unable to protect you, Subaru."

"For someone who was nervous, that was a pretty sick straight right."

"Oh, Subaru, you're making me blush."

After nodding at Rem, whose hands were pressed to her pink cheeks, Subaru looked at the trees where the white-robed men had run off to. They didn't look like typical bandits to him.

"What's your theory? Were they here to hinder Emilia's claim to the throne?"

"That is one possibility. Master Roswaal is also a man who has many enemies. While this sort of incident isn't exactly frequent, it does happen."

"Are you shitting me? Way to make a guy question the safety of his workplace. Also, one more thing…"

Rem had casually said something quite concerning, but Subaru's focus was somewhere else. He glared over at the girl who had remained silent this whole time and was already in the process of sneaking off.

Grabbing her shoulders from behind, Subaru forced the kindest smile he could muster onto his face and said, "And where do you think *you're* running off to, Liliana?"

"Eep! I'm sorry please forgive me I'll apologize just please stop sneering at me like that you're scaring me!"

"I'm not sneering! I'm *smiling* to relieve tension. See?"

"Eep!"

Liliana only cowered more at the sight of Subaru's giant smile.

Subaru was shocked by her reaction, but Rem pulled Liliana away from him and patted her back as if she were soothing a whimpering puppy.

"There, there, Subaru is nothing to fear. His eyes are just lovelier than the average person's."

"Th-that's a rather subjective opinion…but I'm okay now. I've calmed down. Yes."

"Okay, I feel weird for a buttload of reasons…but whatever. Anyway, why'd you try to bail on us? Maybe I'm being paranoid, but are you…?"

Are you in league with those white-robed dudes and your real goal is to stop Emilia's bid for the crown? Subaru had suspected that might be why she had approached them. But before he could voice his question, Liliana fell to her knees on the spot.

"I'm sho shorry! Butbutbut I didn't do nothin' wrong! Those guys have just been chasing me forever…so I thought, *Gee, it'd be nice to put a stop to that*…then I started to think, *Gee, maybe I could ask the people at that marquis's manor for help*, then one thing led to another and—!"

Subaru's eyes went blank as he watched Liliana prostrate herself and beg for forgiveness. Based on her sheer desperation, he decided it was safe to assume she wasn't their enemy.

"So that excuse you gave about being targeted by assassins during that nap—that wasn't a lie?!"

A much more substantial problem had just surfaced. All Subaru could do was clutch his head and groan.

7

"The gist of it is, Liliana is being chased by some mysterious gang."

Subaru flipped through the report as he sank into the sofa. They were back in the study at Roswaal Manor. In the room were four people total, including Subaru. He gestured toward Rem, who was sitting beside him, and said, "To be honest, having Rem there saved us. I hate saying this, but if it was just me and Liliana, we'd be dead."

"And I am glad I was with you, too," Rem said. "Though, I could have been more helpful if I'd had my morning star with me."

"If you did, those guys would be forest fertilizer right now… But yeah, I think the way you handled them was very pretty and

graceful."

Subaru sighed in relief when he thought of the bloodbath they had narrowly avoided. The man who had been beaten senseless by Rem probably hadn't even considered the possibility of getting massacred by a cute maid. Subaru knew that feeling better than anyone.

"So where is our bard right now? The guest room?" Ram asked.

"She's with Emilia-tan. Officially, it's for her safety. We don't want to spook her and have her run on us. We figured Emilia-tan was ideal for the task since she's blissfully ignorant."

"I see. Yes, I can understand why Master Roswaal would want to keep that poet here."

Ram tucked her chin and shot an icy glare at Subaru. He shrugged and said, "We want to make Liliana Emilia-tan's PR manager or something like that, right? Liliana wants to write a new hero's epic all by herself. The biography of a kingdom's new monarch seems like the perfect subject to me."

"Surprisingly quick on the uptake, Barusu. That's cleared up any doubts I had that I was talking to someone with a hollowed-out pumpkin for a head."

"Dude, are you calling me a jack-o'-lantern?"

Ram's criticisms were sharp as ever. Setting that aside, Roswaal's line of thinking was probably similar to his. Without TVs or newspapers, this was a world that lacked the infrastructure for mass media. The influence traveling bards had, singing about history and current events to the public, was probably even bigger than Subaru imagined.

Liliana's songs could be a big boon to Emilia in the royal selection.

"I, too, am mooost pleased that Subaru is quick to catch on. You beauuuutifully described my policy on the matter. To elaborate ever so slightly, I do want to make sure everyone's pros and cons are taken into consideration."

"Pros and cons, eh…"

Roswaal wore a thin smile in satisfaction, which Subaru found just a little bit fishy. Seeing his reaction, Rem answered for Roswaal, her eyes cast downward. "This is difficult to say…but Lady Emilia is a half-elf. Most bards would reject our proposal on that basis alone, so we cannot rule out the possibility. However, as Liliana seems to have taken to Lady Emilia, we believe she will

likely agree, with some provisions."

"In other words…" Subaru began, "if we offer to deal with that insane problem she can't solve on her own, she won't be able to say no… Wow, do I look evil right now?"

"You always look evil."

"You always look lovely."

Receiving deeply conflicting answers from the twins, Subaru grimaced at Roswaal and his rotten personality. He shot the marquis a hard stare and scooted away, only for the man to beam radiantly and wave at him. Subaru sighed.

"Anyway, I guess the plan is to keep an eye on Liliana and try to resolve her problem. It really was a shame that we let her assailants get away. If only we'd captured just one of them…"

"Yes, if we'd broken fifty to sixty bones, he might have spilled everything."

"If you tortured him that badly, the only thing he'd spill is blood, you psycho."

Sometimes, Ram's loyalty was so terrifying that Subaru couldn't tell whether she was joking or not.

"I'll keep my guard up, too, but if I happen to be attacked, all I can do is squeak for help in falsetto. Then again, I doubt these guys have the balls to break into the heavily guarded manor of a marquis."

"If I hear your voice, Subaru, I will come flying to your aid. Whether I'm cleaning or cooking or even bathing, please do not hesitate to call your Rem for help."

"You filthy cad."

"Could you *please* not condemn a guy before he even says anything?!"

Subaru could practically see the puppy-maid Rem wagging her invisible tail even as the kitty-maid Ram skewered him with a deeply judgmental glare. Their usual banter was cut short as the conversation neared its conclusion.

"Anyway, I would liiiike to wait and see," Roswaal said, cutting in. "We will ask Liliana more pressing questions to learn more about her situation while we seek a solution to her problem—how does thaaaaat sound?"

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind when I talk to her. Though, to be honest, I think she's still freaked out of her mind right now," Subaru said.

“She brought a problem that bothers Master Roswaal. She deserves to suffer a little.”

“That’s a rather insolent thing to say about a guest, Ram.” With a cynical smile at Ram’s sass, Subaru got up to leave.

But just as he put his hand on the door, Roswaal said, “As long as she is in my home, I will guarantee her safety. Be aaaaabsolutely sure you tell her that, all right?”

Subaru simply sighed at the loaded statement.

8

“S-sho…I ashume there’s no need to worry about the unforgivably i-i-injolent things I shaid?”

“Dude, what language is that supposed to be?”

After Subaru gave Liliana the marquis’s verdict, Liliana completely deflated and slid out of her chair in relief. It was a pitiful sight, but Subaru graciously overlooked it. After all, while she’d been waiting to hear the news, she was probably the most anxious she’d ever been in her life.

“Now that you’re out of the woods, don’t get any weird ideas that you can wrap the lord of the land up in your problems. Fact of the matter is, you *were* unforgivably insolent—that’s not hyperbole.”

“Urgh! I-I’m sorry. I strive to make my conscience lighter than a breeze, clearer than a surging stream!”

“Okay, I’m banning your absurd quips. They’re upstaging mine.”

Liliana didn’t have the heart to protest. Her actions had directly exposed the lord of the land’s staff to mortal danger. It was undeniably shortsighted and naive.

Subaru found it reassuring that Liliana seemed so obviously devastated and regretful. But somebody else puffed her cheeks in anger after listening to their conversation—namely, Emilia.

“Subaru. Liliana is clearly very sorry for what she did. Can’t you go easy on her?”

“No, I can’t, Emilia-tan. You’ve gotta be blunt with dumbasses like this; otherwise, they never attain the gift of *self-awareness*. She has to get it through her thick skull how keeping secrets can endanger those around— Emilia-tan, why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason. I was just thinking how awful it must be to lack *self-awareness*.”

For some inexplicable reason, Subaru felt very uncomfortable under Emilia’s surprisingly scornful gaze. Sensing he was at a disadvantage, he turned away from Emilia and back to Liliana.

“Now, we’d love to hear your side of the story again, in detail… Just how long have those vagabonds in white been following you?”

“I’ve got absolutely no idea. I only discovered they were following me a few days ago… Don’t ask me to be more specific than that.”

“You’re saying you didn’t notice *anything* that might give us a clue?”

“Nope. Just little things, like my favorite quill disappearing, my clean clothes being gone when I get out of the bath, and my instrument vanishing from the lodge…”

“Um, that sounds like a classic stalker?!”

Subaru cried out in realization, only for Emilia and Liliana to give him confused stares. Apparently, neither of them knew what a stalker was. Emilia was the perfect being, and Liliana was beautiful as long as she kept her mouth shut—he hoped they would be extra vigilant about that sort of thing.

Subaru shook his head vigorously as he remembered how the attackers looked. “Your things going missing probably had nothing to do with the gang that’s been hounding you. Probably just some die-hard fans. Has anybody ever chased after you with a sharp object before?”

“Mm-hmm! The way you worded that sounds vaguely *wrong* somehow…but no, sir, I’ll have you know that today was the first time I caught a glimpse of something sharp and shiny. Otherwise, I’d have a much more solemn look on my face right now.”

“You don’t look all that solemn now… But anyway, what you’re saying is, their MO changed suddenly.”

Subaru’s mind raced, trying to find a motive for the men in white after hearing Liliana’s testimony. But the only abnormality that happened directly to Liliana—the only lead he had—was one event.

“You coming here…and meeting directly with the marquis… You think that made the men in white nervous?”

If Liliana meeting Roswaal had given her assailants a scare, then everything started falling into place. That would mean her

assailants had a specific reason why they didn't want Liliana making contact with one of the royal candidates.

"Dude, don't tell me you have no clue whatsoever. You reek of some seriously shady shit. If you know something, you'd better barf it up now. Otherwise, we can't guarantee we can protect you."

"How dare you say a word like *barf* in front of a fair maiden! I swear on my ancestors and on my lyulyre, I'm not hiding anything! Actually, wait, let's leave my lyulyre out of this!"

"Hey, don't crap out on me when we're running out of time!"

Subaru yelled at the bard as she cradled her livelihood to her chest. But as far as he could tell, she was sincerely racking her brain for a clue. After muttering and nodding to herself a few times, she finally said, "I don't have even the teensiest intention of keeping any secrets from you—my brain just isn't working! Y'know what it feels like when you've got a fish bone lodged between every tooth? The wrongness of it is *torture*, I tell you!"

"Uh, you should probably debone your fish before you eat them, then." How did Liliana manage to have the most serious of intentions and still be the silliest in practice? Subaru turned to Emilia in hopes of steering the conversation back on course.

"So fish-bone metaphors aside…did you figure anything out, Emilia-tan? I'm sure she babbled to you incessantly while you were in here waiting with her, right?"

"Not at all, actually. According to Liliana, she didn't sense anything was amiss until a couple weeks ago… It started before she arrived at Earlham Village. It was around the time she left a town called Wawer. If something particular caused this, then—"

"—Then it happened there. We can be ninety-nine percent sure whatever happened there was the cause of all this. Either something impactful happened or she screwed up or— Hey."

"Why is it a foregone conclusion that *I* screwed up? I must protest this absolute slander!" Liliana cried. Subaru answered her screeching with a chop to the face. She puffed up her lips, grabbed her two pigtails, and shook her head. "Even if you insist…nothing was out of the ordinary. That town was a little cold to strangers, so I didn't exactly feel welcome. That's all, real…ly… Oh! *Ohh!!!* My songs! Please don't sigh after I finish…! Please don't look at me like that…!"

"Um, sorry to make you relive something traumatizing, but could you elaborate? I think we're finally getting somewhere."

Emilia interjected, “What I’d like to know is, why would you stay at such a terrible place for even one day? I’ve experienced the same thing, and it’s just not a good feeling for either party.”

“Oh dear, I’ve caught a glimpse of Emilia-tan’s painful past.”

As Liliana shivered and clutched her head, Emilia’s well-meaning words of wisdom twisted the knife. But it was a reasonable observation. Bards traveled the earth wherever the winds took them. There was no reason someone as footloose and fancy-free as Liliana had to stay in a place where she felt uncomfortable.

“Oh! See, I do have a reason for that. Yes, the townsfolk were a bit standoffish, and it was just awful, but as luck would have it, the richest old-timer in the town took a liking to me!”

“Oh-ho…a rich old man, eh?”

“Oooh yes! He doted on me like I was his own sweet granddaughter. He even bought me a new lyulyre! That’s why this is brand spanking new!”

As Liliana proudly thrust out her lyulyre, Subaru impulsively took it. Mostly because Liliana was getting a little too carried away, but also because he thought it sounded like Liliana had tricked a lonely old man into giving her a bunch of money.

“He fed me yummy food, let me sleep in a soft bed, bought me new clothes and a new lyulyre… It was like a dream. *Gee-hee-hee.*”

“Y’know, it wouldn’t hurt to bring a little more grace *outside* your performances…”

Liliana was drooling and giggling like a drunk. But not only did she ignore Subaru’s advice, she also suddenly hid her silly face and said, “But though it pains me to say it, my happy time there was fleeting. I don’t know what I did wrong, but the old man suddenly kicked me out of his house one day. My spree ended there.”

“So…did you break a vase, sneak food between meals, or have an accident in bed?”

“H-how rude! I haven’t had an accident in five years, thank you very much!”

Five years ago… That would make her sixteen… Subaru stopped there and decided he didn’t want to go through the trouble of unpacking that. Ultimately, it seemed she really didn’t have any clue why she had been kicked out. Even now, Liliana looked utterly perplexed.

The words *rich old man* sounded quite fishy on their own…but it was quite a reach to assume that was the root of the stalking.

Unless the people stalking her were under some misunderstanding about what had transpired between Liliana and the old man.

"Either way, our two clues are the town of Wawer and the old man who lives there. I'll run this by Roswaal just in case… I wonder if he'll look into it?"

"Oh, butbutbut! All the old man did was take care of me and teach me *the song that must never be sung*… I just can't think of anything that might be important."

Emilia sighed. "Is that so…? Yes, I suppose none of that would serve as a clue. Oh bother…"

"Whoa, hold up." Subaru frantically butted into the conversation, hearing something he couldn't ignore. Both ladies gave him quizzical looks, so it seemed neither of them was joking around.

This is why ditziness scares me sometimes. Emilia-tan, you're an angel.

"Excuse me, um… What exactly is this *song that must never be sung*?"

"Huh…? Well, it's a song the old man taught me. It contains the secret of how he amassed his fortune. Both compositionally and lyric-wise, it's really not my thing, if I'm gonna be honest."

"Now, Liliana, you shouldn't talk that way about a song that was gifted to you," Emilia protested. "Would you sing some of it for us?"

"Oooh yes, I'd love to! While I'm at it, I'd love to perform every song I know for you!"

Liliana took her lyulyre back from Subaru and started strumming in high spirits. Emilia's eyes sparkled, her heart dancing from the bard's offer.

And as Subaru watched the pair, he pinched the spot between his eyes. Then he took in a deep breath and yelled—

"The song! It's the *song*, you dumbass!!!"

—and promptly crashed into the blissfully innocent pair's happy moment.

9

"But ya know, I still have questions…"

"Hyesh? Hwhat do ya hwanna mhow?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full. That's unbecoming of a lady."

“Gee-hee-hee. Looks like even the chore boy finally recognizes my womanly charms!”

For some reason, Liliana looked quite proud of herself. Probably because of how she had chosen to interpret Subaru’s scolding. Unfortunately, the way she stuffed her cheeks with snacks like a squirrel made it difficult for her to call herself a lady.

Liliana was currently filling her bottomless pit of a stomach with the special treats that Rem had baked for afternoon tea. As Subaru sipped his tea and enjoyed his sweets in what should have been an enjoyable little afternoon moment of peace, he let out a sigh.

“You’ve been here three days now…”

“Yes, indeed. How the time flies… And?”

“These attackers haven’t exactly been coming after you constantly, but…seriously, what the hell did you do?!”

As Subaru’s shout echoed back in time over the past three days, Liliana’s round eyes grew even rounder in surprise. During the course of her stay at the manor, her pursuers had mounted multiple attacks, coming morning, noon, and night for a total of ten times and counting.

So much for the hope that Liliana’s attackers would back off if she was in the care of a marquis.

“Rem is holding them off all by herself for now, but if there’s one thing these guys are freakishly good at, it’s *running*. We still haven’t caught a single one of them. *How is that even possible?*”

Liliana waved a hand. “Aw, c’mon, if we knew that, we wouldn’t be in this mess. Please don’t make me point out the obvious after all this time.”

“I know you’re an anomaly, but how did you lose any semblance of dignity in just three days?!”

Liliana just laughed it off. She really had gotten a bit too comfortable over the past three days. She’d been her meek little self for only a few hours on the first day. Now she boldly marched around the manor as if the entire place and everything inside it belonged to her. (Either that, or she simply didn’t care what Subaru thought of her.)

“All good things come to those who wait, or so they say. Ram won’t rest easy if we have to wait much longer, though.”

“I do apologize for the inconvenience… By the way, are you gonna eat that? Can I have it?”

“Your gratitude is purely superficial, isn’t it?!”

Taking Subaru’s outburst as a “yes,” Liliana helped herself to Subaru’s last piece of cake. Subaru felt sorry for Ram, who had been working hard for Liliana’s sake.

Rem’s sister was currently in Wawer, the town where Liliana had stayed. Thanks to her investigation there, they had figured out that Liliana’s stalking was indeed connected to the rich old man.

The main thing on Subaru’s mind was the genuine look of disgust on Ram’s face as she’d walked out the door. She may have left the manor under Roswaal’s orders, but it was almost certain that she would take it out on him the moment she got back.

“Despite everything,” Subaru said, “pretty much everyone besides Ram seems to have taken a liking to you.”

OM
NOM
NOM

“Songs don’t care about nationality, language, or race. They just sink into people’s hardened hearts and soften them. Of course, the power of a song is only as good as the worldly wisdom of the bard singing it. A pure heart—*that’s* what moves people. Gee-hee-hee.”

“That is wildly unconvincing coming from you…”

As Subaru watched the beautiful little girl (aged twenty-one) cackle to herself, he felt a distinct sense of defeat. Though she certainly had her physical appearance and talent…she was a far cry from pure and innocent.

In Subaru’s opinion, a beautiful soul was essential for a woman to be charming.

“In that regard, Emilia-tan truly does deserve to be my number one shining star.”

“Did somebody call my name?”

“Eep!”

When Emilia entered the room right as he was talking about her, Subaru’s heart flew out of his chest. Emilia giggled at the boy standing oddly at attention. She pointed above the door. There, the magic time crystal was shining. The people of this world used it to tell the time based on the changing colors.

“It’s almost time. I couldn’t wait, so I ended up coming over.”

“I’d rather hear you say that when you’re at the door to my bedroom after everyone’s asleep… Rem also said she’d be here as soon as she put away the dishes.”

“Hee-hee, I’m sure Rem is also excited. I’m dying to continue where we left things off yesterday.”

Emilia’s cheeks were visibly pink with girlish excitement. Subaru was confident he could fall in love with just a glimpse of her face, but he was jealous because she wasn’t staring at him. Subaru shot Liliana an impulsive glare.

“The muse has spoken! I present you with my new song —‘Loving Heart of Another, Tastes of Honey.’”

“Shut up!” Subaru barked at the bard, who was licking pastry crème off one hand and grabbing her lyulyre with the other. But since he was just being a sore loser, the smug look of victory stayed on Liliana’s face (which only made him all the more bitter).

“Oh, did you start without me?” Rem asked, popping into the room.

“No, you’re right on time,” Emilia answered, scooting over and patting the spot next to her. “Liliana was just teasing Subaru, as usual.”

“Is that how you see it, Emilia-tan? I’m being *teased*?!”

With a quiet “Pardon me,” Rem sat beside Emilia, leaving only one empty seat…

“I’ll join your little soiree, I suppose.”

The door opened a third time. This time, it revealed completely different scenery.

On the other side of the door, which was supposed to lead to the manor’s hallway, there was now a dimly lit library. The spacious room was packed wall to wall with bookshelves. A lone girl emerged from the portal.

Her cream-colored hair was coiled into elaborate rolls. Her precious, doll-like face was decidedly expressionless. The hem of her flashy gown swished as she walked into the room. She took one look around with a smug frown on her face and gave a dainty snort.

“Well, thanks for holding a spot for me. I’ll admire you for that, I suppose.”

“Aww, Beatrice, you big silly, of course we wouldn’t start without you! Why, to do something so dishonorable, I—Liliana—would bring shame to the name of woman!”

“I see. Good attitude. I wonder if somebody could learn a thing or two from you.” Beatrice shot Subaru a sharp look. Still, the little girl, who stood no taller than Subaru when he was seated, was surprisingly charming once Subaru got over her brazen attitude.

“Beako, I still can’t believe you’d leave your Archive of Forbidden Books just to come hear Liliana’s songs.”

“Interacting with the world through a medium besides books isn’t a bad thing, I suppose. That girl’s performances have a certain quality to them. I wonder if her singing voice is more valuable than ten of yours.”

“Could you please stop before I seriously start doubting my self-worth?”

Ignoring Subaru, Beatrice lowered herself into an empty seat. Now all of Liliana’s fans at Roswaal Manor were present. It was a surprise to everyone at the manor that not only Emilia and Rem, but even Beatrice had become a fan of the bard’s music.

“Okay, well, thank you for gathering again today to hear my music. Here to color this little moment with song and story is yours

truly—your singer, Liliana."

Before her audience of four, Liliana stood at the center of the room and delivered her preamble. She was bold and proud as she recited the lines. No matter what she was like the rest of the time, she was the perfect bard when she was performing. (And the bit of cake crumb sticking to her lower lip was more charming than anything else.)

"Now, for my first song, I will perform a modern classic: the 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil,' act two. The curtain opens on the Sword Devil's younger days, when all he knew was the sword…and his chance encounter with flowers, and a beautiful girl."

As Liliana bowed, she was met with the delicate applause of the ladies and the loud applause that came from none other than Subaru. He was well aware that at the end of the day, he was secretly just as excited to hear the continuation of the story as everyone else. It was frustrating, but Subaru's heart had also been stolen by the little singer's voice.

"And now I will sing, if you'll listen—the 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil.'"

As Liliana plucked the strings of her lyulyre, her airy voice joined the music, and she began singing. Suddenly, the room gave way to the world she wove with her lyrics. It felt incredibly real.

"_____"

Every gesture and movement reshaped the world around them until all they could see was the world of the story. Covered in goose bumps, it took everything in Subaru to keep himself from groaning in awe. He couldn't let himself ruin this unbelievable moment.

The story followed a swordsman so devoted to the sword that he came to be known as the Sword Devil. It opened with him moving to the royal capital, becoming a soldier, and being given his own command.

And then he met a girl.

The song burst with color as the Sword Devil—oblivious to the new romance budding in his heart—swung his white blade on the battlefield. The second act concluded with the Sword Devil feeling something that rivaled his love for the sword welling up within him whenever he talked with the girl.

"Thank you for listening. You've been a wonderful audience."

The lyulyre ended its earthshaking melody. The reverberations lingered in the room as Liliana bowed. Subaru shot up straight as he

clapped for her. Emilia and Rem were clapping just as somberly beside him. Beatrice was the only one not clapping, but the faint smile on her face proved that Liliana's music had satisfied her.

"It's just so beautiful… I feel like the story is about to get *really* good."

"I already know the 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil' from start to finish, but I feel like I'm hearing it for the first time," Rem agreed. "I am in awe of your music, Lady Liliana. It was simply inspiring."

"It was acceptable, I suppose. You can play more of the song for me later if you wish."

"Emotionally stunted loli says what…"

While Emilia and Rem gave their pure, sincere praise, Beatrice remained aloof. Subaru poked fun at her to save himself the trouble of offering his honest impressions.

"So, chore boy, what did you think?"

The bard wore a devilish smirk and crinkled her nose. She refused to give Subaru a chance to save face. He bit his lip and sighed in defeat. "Argh… I hate to admit it, but it was crazy good. When you're not singing, you're honestly not that remarkable as a person or as a girl, but when you *are* singing, you're special. Maybe you should sing all the time, for the good of the world and humanity and yourself."

"Do mine ears deceive me?! I think I'm *hearing* praise, but something about it is a little off! How strange!"

Too bitter to pay her a sincere compliment, Subaru slipped in some passive-aggressive snark. That earned him a chortle from Beatrice and a lukewarm glance from Emilia.

"The 'Love Ballad of the Sword Devil' is five acts in all," Rem said. "Naturally, I like the fifth and final act best, but tomorrow's third act is not to be missed. I promise I'll run down here as soon as I finish my work."

"You're a huge fan of this story, aren't you, Rem? Personally, I find Liliana's singing incredibly good, while I have a hard time immersing myself in the story. Think my opinion'll change when I hear the rest?" Subaru asked.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. The Sword Devil's way of life is still idolized today. I hope that someday, Subaru, you'll come for your Rem just like the Sword Devil did."

"If the spoilers I heard are correct, then doesn't that end with

you and me fighting to the death, Rem?" Subaru wondered aloud. Despite his misgivings, his expression softened into a smile when he saw how Rem's cheeks glowed with excitement. It wasn't every day she showed her emotions so openly. That, plus Beatrice's presence, was a testament to Liliana's singing ability. And if Subaru was being honest with himself, he had to admit it made him a little jealous.

To become friends with Rem, Subaru had to try like his life depended on it—quite literally.

"And here you are, fitting in just like that. Not cool."

"Why the sour face, chore boy? Stare at me with those sad eyes all you want. I won't find you endearing or cute. You need to be more objective, take a good look at yourself, and act accordingly."

"Fine advice, considering how *you* act. Wait, could it be that it's all an act to lower our expectations so you'll seem that much more impressive when you sing? What is this, gap *moe*?"

"I haven't the teeniest idea what you're talking about. The epitome of *om-nom-nom*…"

"Don't eat mid-monologue!"

And thus, the surprisingly insightful comment ended in an equally unexpected way.

Now that her song was finished and her lyulyre was leaning safely against the wall, Liliana's hands were filled with snacks once more. In no time at all, the majestic and elegant goddess of music was stained by sugar, transforming into a fallen angel.

This was a familiar sight now after the past three days. Once the performance was over, they mingled and had tea.

But things wouldn't go so smoothly today…

"Excuse me," Rem suddenly said, jumping to her feet and running to the window. Then without a sound, she opened the window and squinted her blue eyes to scan the outdoors. Her gaze stopped at the front gate of the manor. Moments later, she pulled something from her pocket.

"Rem, what is that?"

"A small morning star. I don't have anything else nearby that I can use easily."

Rolling the golf ball–sized metal sphere in her hand with a shy look on her face, Rem hurled the impromptu missile outside. A second later, a dull *thud* followed by a savage shriek sounded in the distance.

Rem looked outside and raised a thumb. "That was a hit."

Subaru shot Rem a smirk and joined her at the window to look outside. And there, he saw the men in white, carrying their unconscious comrade from the front garden.

"They never learn, do they…? How many times do you have to crack their skulls before they get smart?"

"Perhaps every time I crack their skulls, the lessons they learned spill out."

Rem's lack of denial was shiver-inducing. Subaru sighed as he watched the men in white escape. For the past three days, Rem had driven them off just like this.

"This time, it was the men in white."

"True… Wait a minute, did I hear that right? *This time*, they're wearing white?"

"Well, the gangs that are targeting Lady Liliana seem to alternate between bands of men in white and bands of men in mismatched clothing. My theory is that the men in white realized they didn't have the numbers and hired some extra thugs."

"Wait, for real? Are you sure they're the same people? Maybe it's actually two separate gangs?"

"It doesn't seem terribly likely that two unrelated defenseless groups would attack at the same time for different reasons."

Subaru nodded when Rem pointed this out. It would be beyond bad luck if another suicide squad besides the men in white were after Liliana. But if Rem's theory was right, the fact remained that something about this didn't seem to add up.

"Maybe we should knuckle down and try to catch one of them?"

"I considered that, but these people are incredible runners. If I chased after them full speed, I could probably catch one…but I worry that it might take me too far from the manor."

"Rem, don't forget that there's a couple boss-level characters in this manor besides you."

Combat-wise, Rem was about average in Roswaal Manor. Above her stood Emilia with Puck, plus Beatrice and Roswaal, who were both as powerful as a whole army on their own. Objectively speaking, this manor was so heavily defended that the notion of raiding it was completely absurd.

"But I understand why you'd worry about leaving the manor for too long. If those people get impatient and come at us recklessly, that could be *really* problematic," Emilia said.

“Yeah, we want to resolve this as soon as possible. These are just brainless goons lashing out mindlessly, so they don’t pose a real threat to us…but if they get desperate, worst-case scenario, they might start going after folks outside the manor.”

For example, Earlham Village. Casualties there would be a nightmare scenario—Roswaal would condemn anyone who dared to touch his people to an excruciating death by fire.

“I just hope Ram finds the clues we need quickly so that doesn’t happen,” Subaru said.

“Ram is smart, so I’m sure she’ll discover something right away,” Emilia assured him. “Then again, even hearing *that song* didn’t give us any good ideas…”

The song in question was *the song that must never be sung*, which was the most likely reason Liliana was being chased in the first place. Subaru had listened to it many times (rendering its name meaningless), but he didn’t sense any hidden significance at all.

It was an idyllic country folk song that revealed the secret of how the rich man had amassed his wealth in one generation. The claims were so bold that anybody would take the lyrics with a grain of salt. That was why Ram had been sent to the village to verify the claims.

“Are we trapped by trivial constraints, I wonder?” Beatrice mused emotionlessly, teacup in hand. “Boorish, pesky hoodlums like them should be swiftly uprooted and exterminated. We’ll feel much better once they’re dealt with.”

“Dude, read the room. We’re trying to find a peaceful solution here.”

Ultimately, things might go the way Beatrice suggested, but obliterating their attackers without leaving a trace would put a bad taste in Subaru’s mouth. He had learned that during the demon beast incident. If anything, the stakes were even higher now since their opponents were human this time.

“I’ll admit you do have a point. As long as we’re stuck defending, our options are limited… If we could find a way to go on the offensive, we might be able to wrap this case up in one fell swoop.”

“But we don’t have enough party members or intel for that.” Liliana finished Subaru’s thought. “It’s a stalemate. We could always cover our ears and wait for the storm to pass… Yes, let’s just do that.”

“How can you be so uninvested? We’re all doing this for *you*, you know?”

She probably felt safer than ever now that she was under the care of a marquis. Seeing how relaxed Liliana looked then, Subaru realized they wouldn’t need to be worried about how their relationship with her might change after they solved her problem.

The only issue was that they still didn’t know how to solve the aforementioned problem.

“Huh. *We* attack *them*…” Subaru repeated his own words and closed his eyes thoughtfully.

Emilia’s perfect eyebrows knit together in a frown as she watched him. “Uh-oh, Subaru. You’re hatching a nefarious scheme again, aren’t you?”

“Again? Give a guy some credit… You’re not wrong, though. It is nefarious.” With an evil smirk on his lips, Subaru turned to look at the four ladies in the room. And as they all stared back at him, Subaru raised a finger before proposing, “There’s a little strategy I’d like to try… Can you guys help me?”

10

“Man, that really was a stupid thing you did. It helped us out, though!”

As the man spat and laughed, it took everything in Subaru not to crack a smile. They were in a dimly lit hut with its windows shuttered to obscure the outside. The only light source in the room came from ragmite ore, and it only faintly illuminated their surroundings.

This gang was clearly used to playing dirty. That was Subaru’s assessment, at least.

“If you’d stayed holed up at that manor, that freak maid of yours could have kept you safe. Luckily for us, you just wandered out into the open. Got a little cocky, did we? Eh?”

The rough-looking man kicked Subaru. He and the rest of his band sported a savage demeanor that just screamed, *We are goons!* There were eight of them in total, some inside and some outside the hut. Even if Subaru put up a serious fight, they had the numbers to easily beat him to death if they wanted to.

“What’s this? Aww, how precious. Somebody’s shaking. Come on, lover boy, comfort her.”

Beside the grimacing Subaru was a shivering girl hanging her head. A goon taunted her, and Subaru protectively grabbed her hand while the other men laughed.

"Don't worry, we'll be okay. We'll escape somehow…," Subaru assured her.

"That's brave of you. But there's no way you're getting outta here. We took lots of precautions to make sure that crazy maid won't find us. Then again, we've got the girl now, so we don't need you. After we give you a good thrashing, we'll letcha go."

The man made a show of cracking his knuckles. Subaru gulped quietly and firmly squeezed the hand of the shivering girl.

The peasant's dress barely covered her body. Her exposed shoulders looked so fragile. Subaru gently put an arm around her to shield her from the ogling eyes of the thugs. When she shuddered, the men whistled. But then—

"Is it true?! Did you really get the girl back?!"

Following the shout, the door violently burst open, allowing outside light to shine into the dark hut. Subaru reflexively squinted his eyes as he beheld the backlit figure at the door, who was panting and gasping for air.

Several blinks brought the newcomer into focus. Subaru could see it was a young man. He was dressed well, and his hair was immaculately combed. The young man looked around the room, his eyes widening when he spotted Subaru and the girl. He cried, "Ohh, Liliana! At last I've found yo— Wait, who's this man?"

"Some rich guy's manservant who's been hiding her. We caught them together, and—er, young master?"

The young man's gaze stayed on Subaru, his cheeks reddening in the blink of an eye. From the way his goons were cautiously sussing out the young man's mood, it was clear that he was their employer—the mastermind.

As Subaru came to this conclusion, the young man snorted wildly and shrieked, "You *bastarrrd*! Wh-who…gave you permission to t-touch herrr?!"

"Errr—ahh?!"

The roaring man's kick sent Subaru flying into a wall. As Subaru's eyes rolled from the sudden attack, the goons filled the silence with their own yelling.

"Y-young master, what was *that* for?!"

"B-b-*because*! That bastard was getting all cozy with my

Liliana!”

Shaking off the goons who were trying to hold him back, the young man knelt before Liliana. Keeping his eyes on the floor, he extended a hand and said, “Ohh, my dearest Liliana. We finally meet. ’Tis I, Kiritaka, your love slave. When I heard the infamous demi-human lover brought you into his manor, a waterfall of pure anxiety nearly ripped my chest asunder. Ohh…ohh…Liliana…!”

Apparently, the man named Kiritaka loved hearing himself talk. However, Subaru couldn’t refute the accusation—he was aware of the marquis’s terrible reputation, so all he could do was don a sour look. Instead of responding to Kiritaka, Subaru rubbed his sore shoulders, turned to the goons, and said, “Hey, doesn’t it bother you, working for this asshole?”

“He pays us well. Just snatching that one little girl is gonna keep us flush for quite a while. So we can overlook his…you know.”

From the way the goons talked, it seemed they *did* know what their boss was all about. Now that he was aware of the gritty circumstances, Subaru foresaw a misguided conclusion to the brouhaha around Liliana.

He had just assumed that Liliana was targeted because of a certain song, but it was Liliana herself who made Kiritaka burn with desire. The way he expressed his love was maniacal, but Subaru could see nothing else guiding Kiritaka beyond that.

“What happened, Liliana?! Why won’t your precious eyes look upon me?” When Kiritaka was confronted by the girl’s unbroken silence, his obsessive cries of passion came to a halt. His brows knit together, and he asked, “Why aren’t you speaking…? Did they do unspeakable things to you when they brought you here?!”

“Stop it, young master! We did exactly what you told us to. And I shouldn’t have to say this, but nobody in their right mind would do anything with a flat-chested, prepubescent girl like—”

“When will these pesky flies buzz off, I wonder?”

A girl’s voice growled just as Kiritaka and his men began to squabble. The moment he heard it, Kiritaka looked up, his face reddening in shock. He was the only one who noticed that the voice of the girl before them did not belong to the one they were after.

“Wh-who the hell are *you*?! You aren’t my Liliana!”

“You don’t deserve to know Betty’s name.”

Right as Subaru was silently thinking, *But you just told them your name*, the pigtailed girl rose to her feet. Unlike Liliana’s, her hair

was twisted into two tight rolls.

"Outside and inside, we have nine people. I wonder…will all those fingers be enough to give us what we need?"

An instant later, the hoarse screams of the men echoed off the walls of the hut.

11

Subaru had proposed a simple scheme to go on the offensive against the goons who were after Liliana.

"It wasn't practical to follow you back to your home base, so we obediently let ourselves be kidnapped and let you take us straight to your mastermind. Luckily for us, you guys aren't that trigger-happy."

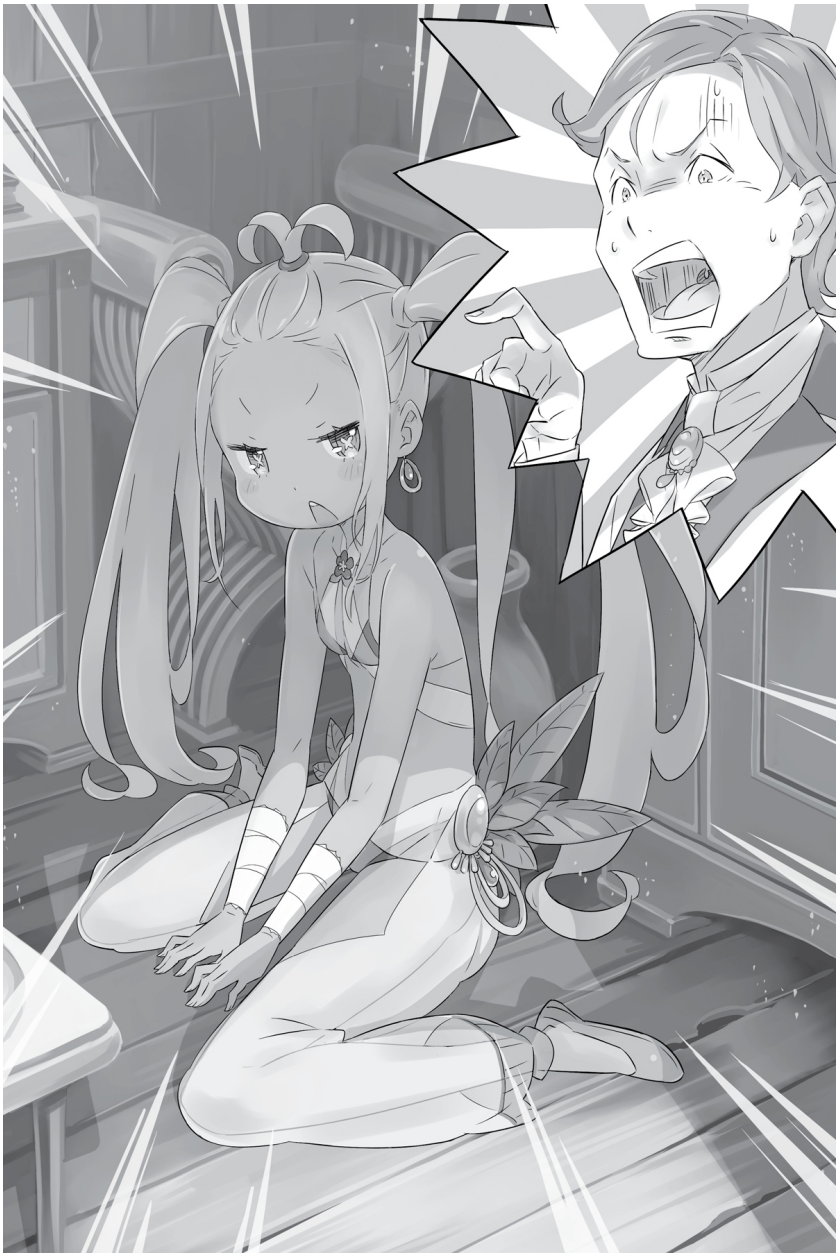
"With everything you put me through, success was inevitable, I suppose." With a sigh, Beatrice rubbed her face and limbs with the towel Subaru handed her. The makeup gradually came off, revealing her original skin tone.

As he watched Beatrice painstakingly wipe her body all over, Subaru folded his arms and said, "But dang, the more like Beako you become, the weirder that outfit looks on you."

"And exactly *whose* plan forced me to dress like this in the first place?"

"Well, my plan, obviously… I just didn't realize I would cringe this hard."

As Subaru gave a disappointed shrug, veins popped on Beatrice's forehead. She was currently dressed in a costume to fool their assailants—in other words, Liliana's very-revealing dance outfit. Neither Liliana nor Beatrice looked particularly grown-up, yet for a reason Subaru couldn't explain, seeing Beatrice in the skimpy outfit was somehow worse.



(He wondered if it was because he knew her better and knew how she normally dressed.)

"If you hadn't asked me to and if that girl didn't need help, I wonder what could've possibly made me do such a thing."

"When I came up with the idea of using you as bait… Even I'm surprised by how rotten I can be sometimes… Still, at the end of the day, you're kind of a ditz."

"It sounded like you said the most insulting thing possible just now."

"Oh, no, it was a compliment. It's the most cutting-edge expression of *moe* in the current era. Dunno about ten years from now, though."

Ignoring the sour stare from Beatrice, Subaru surveyed the carnage in the hut. All the goons were splayed on the floor after being beaten mercilessly by Beatrice. Kiritaka was down like the rest of them and had apparently broken the fall of a large goon. Subaru pressed his hands together and muttered a quick prayer for the man.

One provision for the kidnapping ruse was that Liliana would not be put in harm's way. It also wasn't an option to bring Rem along as protection, since the men knew to keep their distance from her. And since putting Emilia in anything even resembling danger was unacceptable, that just left Subaru and Beatrice.

To make it work, they asked Puck to persuade Beatrice, who had been very reluctant. After a quick makeover by the giggling girls, Subaru took Beatrice out to initiate their ruse.

Not even Subaru, the grand architect of this ruse, dreamed that it would go this well.

"My own resourcefulness scares me sometimes," he muttered. "But the fact that we made it all the way to the mastermind means Ram's on a fool's errand. Now it's even more likely she'll give me an earful when she gets back. Beyond lame."

"If you have time to grumble, you ought to tie them up so they can't escape. I suppose the younger twin will arrive shortly and will need to take them back to the manor."

"And there, Roswaal's interrogation of terror awaits… I feel sorry for you guys…even though you brought it on yourselves."

This is what happens when you let infatuation get out of control.

Subaru mused that stalkers were probably just as scary in any world. Though as for what exactly was so appealing about Liliana when she wasn't singing…only Kiritaka, currently unconscious and foaming at the mouth, would know.

"Well, either way, this was an unexpected resolution. When the men in white find out their mastermind got caught, they'll either surrender or back off. So…case closed, I guess."

While he felt the ending was a bit anticlimactic, Subaru let himself relax for the time being. Then he reached for the cased lyulyre, which had gotten flung across the room. Beatrice had brought it along as an accessory to her Liliana disguise.

"It's okay, I hope? If it's broken, there's no telling what Liliana would do to me."

He carefully retrieved the lyulyre from its case and ran his fingers across the strings. Once he heard their gentle sound, he began to improvise a song.

Beatrice shot him a surprised look and said, "Hey…can you really play that instrument, I wonder?"

"Yeah, it's not much different from an acoustic guitar. I borrowed it now and again over the past three days; so as long as it's seventies folk music, I can stumble my way through it."

In his former world, he would sometimes borrow his father's guitar and kill time by playing folk songs. It was a pointless exercise, as nobody was around to hear him, but now, in another world, his work was finally bearing fruit.

"Since the rights holders can't hit me with a cease and desist here…maybe it's time I bring a musical revolution to this world."

"From what I know about you, when it comes to pointless skills, you're second to none. I do wonder, what point is there in becoming so accomplished in pointless pursuits?"

"Oh, burning with passion over pointless pursuits is what romance is all about, my dude."

Beatrice shook her head and gave a frustrated sigh from the bottom of her heart. Then she inexplicably closed her eyes and listened to the music. Her expression was strangely peaceful.

"Geez, what am I gonna do with you?"

As Beatrice quieted down and respectfully listened to him play, Subaru was reluctant to stop. And making these little excuses to himself, Subaru would keep playing in a private concert for two—until Rem ran into the hut with a concerned look on her face.

12

“Wait. Are you saying Liliana’s songs had nothing to do with the attempted kidnappings?” Emilia murmured, her eyes wide with astonishment after Subaru told her what had happened.

The plan had ended without a hitch. The goons and their mastermind had been brought back to the manor and were in the middle of a gentle interrogation with Rem and Roswaal.

While waiting for them to finish, Subaru had gone to see Emilia and Liliana to inform the two very nervous girls that the situation was over. After he told them everything in the garden, both girls were relieved to hear that everything had been settled peacefully.

“That really is good news. Subaru, I hope you aren’t hurt? Is Beatrice all right, too?”

“I almost cried when they roughed me up, but I’m keeping strong for you, Emilia-tan. As for Beako, as soon as she got back, she changed clothes and locked herself in her room as per usual.”

“Oh, okay… It’s a little unfortunate since Beatrice looked so cute like that.”

Subaru smirked at Emilia’s disappointment. For Beatrice, the whole ordeal of being a dress-up doll had probably been quite agonizing. As soon as she got back, she took off the costume, hurled it at Subaru, and disappeared into the Archive of Forbidden Books.

“Is that so…?” Liliana murmured docilely after breaking her silence. “That *is* too bad. I want to thank Lady Beatrice properly.”

Understandably, as somebody who’d been the center of a crime that just got resolved, Liliana had a lot of feelings to process. Especially the part where she’d been a victim of an insidious stalker.

“So that mastermind, Kiritaka—anybody know him? From the look of things, he was quite enamored with you. Maybe he’s got bad eyes.”

“Ignoring the last few words you said—well, yes, I do know him. Before I came here and before I visited Wawer, there was a little merchant town. I think he’s the heir to a famous merchant who lives there.”

“He looked filthy rich to me, so I guess that tracks… So, um, about him stalking you…please tell me you were at least partially aware of that.”

“Well, he loved my songs, and he treated me to some yummy

feasts…but I felt like I gave him a satisfying farewell."

"Don't tell me you just swindle a rich sap in every town you visit?"

Between the rich old man in Wawer and the perv-merchant heir, he was starting to realize Liliana must be considered a beauty in this world. For Subaru, whose ideal was Emilia, it was a preference that was unfathomable.

Subaru openly stared at her up and down, making Liliana hug her flat chest with her thin arms and say, "Wh-what're you doing? Stop undressing me with your eyes! What, have you finally realized my allure, now that you've seen other people obsess over me? Have you gone mad with love?!"

"There, there. Just happy to see you're back to your old self. And y'know, it's never the victim's fault when they're stalked, so chin up. And here's your lyulyre back."

"Humph! I'm not exactly satisfied by that! Thanks for the lyulyre, though."

Liliana was still frowning as she took the lyulyre case. But forced cheer was still cheer. Whatever spunk he could get out of her was better than nothing.

"What's this, Emilia-tan? Why are you gazing upon me with such pretty and gentle eyes?"

"Mmm, no reason? Just thinking that you are about as honest as Beatrice sometimes."

Emilia giggled into her hand while Subaru cocked his head in confusion.

"Butbutbut, I'm afraid to say that now I am even more in your debt." Liliana sighed. "Now I'm in no place to ask the master of the house for a hero's epic. What despair. My hopes are dashed!"

Meanwhile, despite the crisis before her very nose being resolved, Liliana's jaw dropped in desperation as she took an objective look at the situation she now found herself in. From her perspective, she had caused problem after problem for the residents of Roswaal Manor.

Not even Liliana, a beacon of shamelessness, could bear to be that ungrateful.

But knowing Roswaal's true intentions, Subaru knew that Liliana's anxiety was needless. If anything, the chips had fallen in Roswaal's favor, as now Liliana the bard was very much in his debt and would have to participate in the royal selection.

“Well, I’m sure Roswaal will approach you with the details when the time comes. If anything, he might tackle you with a hug for being in his debt.”

“Huh…? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll learn soon enough.”

Emilia and Liliana were both confused by what Subaru said. Liliana aside, Emilia’s inability to grasp the obscured information really brought her innocence through in an adorable way.

With a little “Now then!” Subaru stood up and looked up at the manor. The interrogation had gone on for about an hour. Surely, they must have gleaned some information.

“I doubt Roswaal will let the stalker and victim have a direct confrontation, but I’d like to get his opinion anyway. Let’s go see him.”

“Oh, um, before we go, could we drop off my instrument and my change of clothes in my room?”

When she heard they were going to where the mastermind was, Liliana asked a favor of him with a grim look on her face. And indeed, the clothes she’d had Beatrice wear and her lyulyre wouldn’t exactly be suitable things to bring to a confrontation.

“Okay, guess we’ll do that first. Emilia-tan, go ahead to the study without me.”

“Understood. I need to make sure the wrongdoers are suitably punished,” sweet and friendly Emilia muttered crossly as she balled her slender hands into fists. Though he found the sight enchanting, he walked Liliana in the opposite direction as Emilia. Instead of going to Roswaal’s study with her, they were headed to the east wing opposite it, where Liliana’s guestroom was.

And then—

13

Emilia returned to the manor from the central garden and was climbing the stairs in the main wing when she looked up suddenly, sensing someone. And directly in front of her, on the landing of the stairs leading to the third floor, Rem appeared, her skirt fluttering around her.

Blinking in surprise at the short skirt ruffling before her eyes, Emilia said, “Rem, don’t run in the halls. It’s dangerous.”

“Oh, Lady Emilia. Do forgive me, but I have an urgent matter to

attend to."

"Is everything okay?"

Emilia raised an eyebrow at Rem, who was uncharacteristically flustered. Rem ran over to Emilia, peered down the stairs behind her, and asked, "Aren't Subaru and Liliana with you?"

"Er, they stopped by her room to drop off some things… Did you learn some news?"

"Yes, I got most of it from Master Roswaal. Kiritaka Muse, heir of the Muse Company, was behind the plot. He took a fancy to Liliana, apparently."

"Yes, Subaru told me that, too…"

And Lilliana had seemed confused, not thinking Kiritaka was that obsessed with her. But Rem just shook her head at Emilia and said, "I'm terribly sorry, but that isn't the actual problem. Kiritaka did hire those thugs to bring Lady Liliana back to him. And thanks to Subaru's ruse, that plan failed. However…"

"That wasn't the end of it?"

"According to Kiritaka, he doesn't remember hiring the men in white. He insisted he had nothing to do with them."

The moment she heard this, Emilia realized why Rem was in such a hurry and rushed down the stairs. Rem joined her, and the two ran full speed to the east wing where Subaru and Liliana had gone—to Liliana's room.

Unable to see anyone behind the ajar door, Emilia spoke, her voice shuddering in shame over her mistake.

"They never came back."

14

Subaru was hog-tied and lying atop the cart, its wheels rattling against the ground. All he could do was glare up at the sky.

He and Liliana had been ambushed on their way back to the manor. The next thing he knew, there he was—on his back, seeing nothing but blue sky.

He was wrapped tightly in cloth, then tied with rope, immobilized in the worst way possible. There was a faint lingering pain in his head from being punched, and judging by the way he was tied up—

"Aha, looks like sonny boy woke up, too. Sorry we were so rough with ya, kid."

The booming voice came from somebody who noticed Subaru was conscious. Subaru craned his neck to look in the direction of the voice, and there, he saw a seated figure robed in white. Noting the unsettling head-to-toe white ensemble, Subaru finally grasped the situation he was in.

The men in white had not stopped their activities, even though their boss had been captured. They had to be an unrelated party.

“Wait, does that mean being a Liliana fan and wanting her song were two separate motives?! Could you make things any more complicated?!”

“The muse has spoken. I present you with my new song —‘Liliana, a Sinful Flower.’”

“Shut up! Now’s no time for singing!” Subaru yelled at the girl, who was tied up the same as him. He couldn’t see Liliana from the way he was positioned, but given how she was still able to utter her silly little catchphrase, it sounded like her spirit wasn’t completely broken. Breathing a sigh of relief to himself, Subaru turned his head to look at the man in white.

“So…any chance we can talk without the kicking and punching?”

“Yeah…we’d prefer that, too. Maybe too little, too late, but we want to move you without too much roughhousing.”

“Too little, too late? No shit. Some credibility you have there.”

The man chuckled with a quiet “Fair point.” Then he removed his white hood, revealing a bearded face. He looked like he was in his early forties.

“We are the White Dragon’s Scale, mercenaries for hire.”

By exposing his face and offering his name, the man was clearly trying to negotiate. It was a surprisingly cordial thing to do, considering how roughly he had treated Subaru before. Subaru felt the man’s attempt at goodwill was just as clunky as the cart’s wheels on the ground beneath them.

“Ugh, I’m gonna hurl. Could you at least let a guy sit up when you talk to him?”

“Nothing would please me more than that—but unfortunately, we tied you up so nice and tight that you’re stiff as a wooden board right now, and trying to sit you up would be quite a struggle. Sorry, but you’ll have to keep lying down.”

“Well, if I get carsick, I know where I’m aiming. Cower before my mighty mayo-vomit attack.”

Due to their little ruse earlier that day, all Subaru had to eat was that world's equivalent of mayonnaise, so that was the only thing that would come up, should the need arise.

Subaru's quip seemed to win the man over. As he raised his arms in a gesture of defeat, another voice cut into their conversation.

"Wait, is this cart being pulled by that ox thing instead of a land dragon? Man, you guys are using some old-school animals. We're basically riding an artifact, y'know."

"I don't know if you're saying that out of shock, sarcasm, awe, or intimidation, but none of that's helpful right now, so shut up for a minute."

Subaru turned his head and grabbed the bound foot just barely in his vision, and a set of toes wriggled back at him. Apparently, they had set Liliana and Subaru down side by side, head to toe.

"Guess this is a classic case of out of the frying pan into the fire. We didn't see it coming."

"Yes, looks like the success of our kidnapping strategy backfired epically! Now, chore boy, as the architect of this master plan, I'd love to know what you're thinking right now!"

"I'm thinking, if I could just slap your flippant face right now, nothing else would matter."

Thanks to Liliana's usual antics, Subaru was somehow able to retain his composure. Though in actual fact, the men in white had them in the palm of their hand. And Liliana was right; the White Dragon's Scale's ambush had only worked because Subaru's guard had been down after the success of his ruse. Even though the men in white hadn't planned on that, the circumstances had linked the two groups together and made the bard ripe for the taking.

"I'm pretty sure our buddies back at the manor have noticed we're missing by now…"

However, it was painfully clear that their lack of manpower would affect how quickly their friends could find them. Their list of allies was short enough as it was, but Ram was still away on an investigation. Neither Emilia nor Roswaal could take direct action, and Subaru was uncertain whether or not Beatrice would help.

That meant the only one who could actively search for them was Rem.

Reading his mind, Liliana piped up, "Our friends have to keep an eye on the people we just caught, so our chances of rescue are

pretty slim, eh?"

"Yeah…afraid so."

Liliana's words twisted the knife. With their situation dire in every way possible, how could Subaru and Liliana keep themselves safe?

"Looks like we're on our own. Just us and diplomacy."

They would skillfully and eloquently craft a plea that wouldn't push their captors' buttons and would result in their freedom. Luckily, their captors had signaled that they did want to negotiate. Subaru's only choice was to engage in a little diplomatic fencing, seeking out compromises and securing their safe release.

"You can do it, chore boy."

"If you want this to work, then keep that mouth shut. Don't answer that—just take note."

"You two just about done?"

Seeing that his captives were wrapping up their conversation, the man returned and lowered himself onto the cart bed with a thunk and folded his legs.

"Now, let me introduce myself again… We are a band of mercenaries called the White Dragon's Scale."

"Sorry, but I'm new in town, so I'm not up to date about local gossip. Meanwhile, she's a wandering bard with no roots to speak of…and bless her heart, she's kinda dumb and slow on the uptake."

"Hey, chore boy! Don't bless my heart! This is no time for romantic overtures!"

In the interest of negotiations proceeding smoothly, Subaru ignored Liliana's little outburst. The bearded man followed his lead and ignored Liliana as well, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, I can't blame ya for not hearing of us. Only a part of Lugunica knows about us, and that was about ten years ago. We don't exactly have as much of a reputation anymore."

"Before… Did you disband and get back together? You really should consider your age if you're gonna be naughty."

"No, we didn't disband. We did cut back a little, though. But then we got this job that we had to finish. We can't hang up our robes for good until we do."

The bearded man's voice was low, and his eyes were filled with resolve. Between the proud atmosphere and the hint of tragedy in the man's demeanor, Subaru sensed there were extraordinary circumstances at play.

Lying on his back, Subaru let out a sigh and said, “So…you’re doing one last job before you finally retire?”

“Our treasurer betrayed us—snuck off with every last coin to our name. We just want to get back everything he stole. We can’t retire until we do that.”

“Wait, what…? What does that have to do with Liliana?”

Going off age alone, it was impossible to believe that Liliana was the treasurer in question.

“The traitor built himself a huge mansion in town with the fortune he stole. We’re sure he’s been living in the lap of luxury, the bastard… Anyway, we found him. We were gonna get the money back and get some closure…but that wily old man!”

Subaru waited for the man to continue.

“He noticed we were onto him. That’s when he hid the money in a cave and locked it up with a metia. And the key to unlock it is a *song*, of all things.”

“A song…! Now I get it. *That’s* how she’s connected.”

As he listened to the bearded man speak, the word *song* surged through his brain like lightning. The old man who’d welcomed Liliana into his home and taught her *the song that must never be sung*—that was the treasurer who’d betrayed White Dragon’s Scale. And that song was the key to unlocking the seal the old man had used to hide his treasure.

The old man had forced the key onto Liliana, a traveler. Then he had forced her out of his house and far away from the town where his treasure was hidden. Then when the members of the White Dragon’s Scale learned that Liliana knew the song, they tried to capture her. Kiritaka was just some random asshole. A bit of white noise that made everything less clear.

“And the rich man of Wawer is your traitor? Man, this was a *revenge* plot all along?”

“We do resent him for betraying us. But at this point, we don’t really care what happens to him. We just want our fortune… We just want to get back what we rightfully earned. We *have* to get it back.”

The man looked down, his voice quiet with gritty determination. Subaru sensed they had a reason for needing so much money. A reason that was time-sensitive.

“This cave where the money’s hidden—do you know where it is?”

“We do. So all we need now is the song to unlock it. In other words…”

“If Liliana sings and unlocks the cave, there will be much rejoicing.”

The matter would be resolved, and Subaru and Liliana would be set free.

Subaru’s face lit up. He had found a compromise both parties could agree to and a way for them to be released peacefully. Seeking Liliana’s approval, he turned to the girl, whose fingers were shaking.

“Hey, Liliana, you heard that, right? The only thing you have to do is sing *the song that must never be sung* to that cave, and all’s well. So—”

“—refuse.”

“Eh?” Both Subaru and the bearded man grunted in unison. That was just how out of the blue Liliana’s answer seemed to be. Her fingers jutted out straight like claws. It was like a physical expression of the unyielding nature of her will.

“Unlocking spells on caves…I will never sing for such a purpose. Music isn’t… Music isn’t any substitute for money or treasure—for things that will eventually disappear! I refuse! Don’t mock music…don’t mock stories…and don’t you dare look down on bards!”

15

On the cold, hard ground, Subaru shifted the angle of his bottom to ease the pain.

As he rubbed his knees together to combat the cold of the cave, he wondered what time it was. Perhaps because there’d been signs of sunset when they were outside earlier, he assumed it was pitch-black outside by then.

A gust of wind would blow through the cave now and again, echoing off the walls like the moans of lost spirits or ghouls. If not for the dimly reflective lanterns on the walls and the sound of people talking, this place could be easily mistaken as a dimension detached from the living and the dead.

“Between the moaning winds and the daytime chill, nobody round these parts would even shit near a place like this. Perfect place to hide a fortune.”

The bearded man reinforced Subaru's impressions with his little remark as he leaned against the wall, a savage smirk on his face. Though his language and tone were coarse, his attempt to engage his captives in conversation showed that he was a thoughtful and logical man. He leaned his unmasked, bearded face closer to Subaru and Liliana.

"I heard it's not a good idea for a kidnapper to let his captives see his face," Subaru argued.

"Yeah, sorry you got caught up in this, son. It'd just be a pain if you made a ruckus, y'know? Don't hate me. It's on you for being with that girl in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Uh, no, I'm gonna hate you guys. Don't put this on me."

"Fair is fair." The bearded man laughed from his belly. He seemed amused by his talkative hostage.

Subaru thought the guy had a lot of nerve to laugh at a time like this. After all—

"Cut the high-and-mighty bullshit! Are you *trying* to make us angry?!"

From deep within the cave, a furious roar cut through the air and bounced off the walls. The voice was filled with intimidation, anger, and threat. The anger in it was genuine. To anyone who heard the voice, it was clear that its outraged owner might burst in and unleash their violent wrath onto everyone present. And yet—

"Nooo! I refuse! My songs are only sung in a fun way befitting of them. I will not sing for any other purpose! Don't mock a bard, or you'll be sorryyy!"

The rebuttal was packed with so much rage that it was clear their conversation was not very productive. The girl refused the demand with every fiber of her being, reflecting how highly she thought of her profession.

"This is going nowhere…" The bearded man scratched his short mop of hair. Subaru couldn't agree more. Both sides had a line they wouldn't cross, and there was no bridge in sight to bring them together.

After several hours of Liliana's caustic cries, the dispute had carried on even after they arrived at the cave in question. The White Dragon's Scale was a small group consisting of about ten men, including the bearded man. The bearded man watching over Subaru seemed to be the group's leader. Since he showed himself to be somewhat of a moderate, Subaru and Liliana had avoided abuse

up until then.

But many of the group's members favored a more radical approach. The man exchanging choice words with Liliana now was one of them—a young man with short brown hair and a boyish voice. The young man had a bandage on his nose. The wound underneath was probably the main reason for his stubbornness.

"He got that busted nose the first time we visited your little mansion. The blue-haired lady gave that to him. Smashed his nose like she enjoyed it. That's part of why he's so pissed," the bearded man explained.

Subaru replied with an understanding "Ahhh," and had nothing but sympathy for the man. There were three other people besides the broken-nosed man who were angry they had also become Rem's victims.

"But, Liliana's being just as stubborn…too stubborn," Subaru muttered. "Her devotion to her profession is admirable but… Is it really that important? Is it really worth dying for?"

Despite the relentless onslaught of abuse from the men, Liliana swore she would never bend to their will. Just when Subaru had pegged her as a flimsy airhead, she had to go and show some inflexible grit and conviction in herself. He could imagine nobody more annoying and difficult to handle than her in that moment.

"Yeah…you bet it's important. There's gotta be *something* out there worth sacrificing your life for…"

Surprisingly, the one who agreed with Liliana's declaration was none other than the bearded man. When Subaru shot him a dubious look, the bearded man cast a restless glance deep into the cave and said, "Living is easy if all ya do is eat, sleep, and breathe—anybody can do that. But if you want to do something with your life…well, that's when you start to find some things you can't compromise on."

"Noble words coming from you, my guy. Wasn't there some reason you had to finish the job fast?"

"The other guys do, yeah. But me… That reason doesn't exist anymore. The reason I'm still here is because I wanted to prove that there's more to my life than just eating, sleeping, and breathing."

The bearded man lowered his eyes, picked up a nearby bottle of liquor, and took a swig. He wiped the trickle of liquor roughly off his face with his sleeve, and as he looked into the darkness of the cave, there was an emptiness in his eyes.

Subaru didn't know his backstory, and he wasn't going to ask

for it. The man probably wouldn't tell him anyway. But the more time that passed, the harder this would be for everyone involved.

"Hey, bearded gentleman… Sorry, but could you maybe loosen my ropes a little?"

"Don't get the wrong idea, boy. We want to resolve this peacefully so we ain't thrashing you, but we ain't setting you free, either. If you even dream about scramming, things'll get messy."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I promise I won't run away. You can keep my hands tied. Just let me walk deeper into the cave. I wanna talk some things over with Liliana."

The bearded man looked at Subaru and mused over the proposition for a while. Then he sighed and said, "Yeah, it's a stalemate otherwise… Fine. It's always easier to convince a person if you get her friend to do it. It's better for all of us."

The bearded man untied Subaru's feet. Finally free to move again, he stretched out his stiff limbs, letting the blood flow through them before standing up.

"You come with me, okay? Nothing good will come of staying here drinking."

Gesturing over his shoulder at the man with his chin, Subaru began to head deeper into the cave, his hands still bound. As he walked, the cold breeze rustling his hair, Subaru squinted his eyes shut in the light of the ragmite. Then he cautiously opened his eyes into the light and saw it.

"So this is it…the stupid metia that's unlocked by a song."

Before Subaru's eyes stood a black wall blocking the path deeper into the cave. The wall obstructing the stone passageway had geometric carvings on it, and in the center, a blue crystal was embedded. The wall itself seemed to be made of a material similar to iron, but it was a little too black and a little too mysteriously imposing for that.

"It's rigged to move only when certain conditions are met," the bearded man explained. "It doesn't always have to be a song, but this door is rigged to open only when this girl here sings the song."

"Are you sure Liliana has to sing it?" Subaru asked.

"It won't open if anybody else sings it. Our traitor had her sing into the metia and used that to put the magic seal on this cave. That's why only the girl's song can open it."

Hearing the bearded man's explanation, Subaru approached the metia again. And before the black wall was Liliana, who was now

completely uncooperative, and the men in white, furiously trying to get her to sing.

"This is bullshit—we're *so close*! Just sing a tiny bit, and it'll all be over!"

"I refuse. And I can't abide by my music being mocked even a tiny bit. The muse has spoken. I present you with my new song —'Your Heart—Unlike Your Clothes—is Pitch-Black.'"

"Shut up, you pigheaded idiot! Don't provoke them!" Subaru barked at Liliana, who was ignoring the men as they kept threatening her. Startled by the entrance of a third party, Liliana opened one eye and looked up at Subaru.

"Oh—what's up, chore boy? Did we get to the part where they mercilessly torture you in front of me to get me to talk? Well, sorry, but even if Chore Boy turns into a lump of meat, I'm not budging."

"Stop that, it's no fun for me. Besides, if these guys get desperate, you'll be in much worse shape than me as a girl. You understand what I'm getting at, right? I hope you do."

"Wh-what are you fantashizing, you shicko? Sh-shtop it, you shtupid dog…!"

Her face bright red, Liliana showed embarrassment over the conversation's dark twist, which she'd mostly brought on herself. Sighing at her lack of foresight, Subaru looked back at the mercenaries.

"I sympathize with your problem, but you realize she won't listen to you, right? I hate to say this, but she won't compromise on her principles, even if you hurt her bad."

Hearing Subaru's frustrated plea, the men exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"And you—you won't sing no matter what. No matter how badly these guys want you to sing, you're not singing."

"Chore boy." Liliana looked at Subaru with a meaningful look in her eyes. "If my song is needed, then I will sing. But it's not my *song* these men want; it's the *results* of my song. I would never sing for such a reason. Even if they slash my throat and rip my tongue out, I won't sing."

"So you won't even sing if your life depends on it?"

"Not even if my life depends on it, no. If I bend my principles for fear of my life once, then my pride will be cracked, and it can be easily broken again and again. And once it's full of cracks, my pride will be invisible to everybody. And when I look in the mirror, I'll

have to see myself without any pride—and I'd rather die."

With that final word, Liliana bit her lip. It was the expression of someone who knew that her declaration would likely enrage her captors. She had an unbending dedication to her career. Simply put, this was Liliana's way of life.

Subaru had lost count how many times he'd heaved a frustrated sigh because of her obstinacy. "If you don't sing, my life is also in danger." He stared intently at her. "Doesn't that change anything?"

But Liliana only agonized silently in reply, her eyes darting around for a moment in conflict. Subaru grinned widely in resignation. If this was a girl who was willing to throw someone else under the bus to protect her ego, Subaru could have gladly ditched her to save himself.

But in that moment of conflict, she considered surrendering her pride, and that was enough to convince Subaru.

"You heard the lady. She won't sing. I won't make her sing, either."

"Hey, that's not…"

That's not what you promised—the bearded man's astonished eyes finished. He sensed the mood from the other men had also grown even more precarious.

"Chore boy…why…?"

"If you don't want to sing, then don't. I'm siding with you, that's all," he answered, standing protectively between Liliana and the menacing stares of the men. Liliana's voice trembled behind him. Hearing this, Subaru knew he'd made the right decision. Turning back to the men, he said, "Her song is not a tool to be used. If you heard her sing just once, you'd understand."

"Boy, stop joking around if you know what's good for—"

"If she doesn't wanna sing, then I don't want to make her sing, either! I hate to admit it, but her songs are awesome! Anybody who hears her sing knows it. And I don't wanna make her sing in vain—I won't let you force her!"

As the men raked him with their eyes, Subaru stood protectively in front of Liliana with a defiant declaration.

The bearded man nervously looked at his companions. All the men in white aside from him saw Subaru's declaration as a point of no return. As they marched forward, tension shot through the air.

"Chore boy…!" Liliana cried at Subaru, her lips quivering over the malice in the men's eyes. There was a catch in her voice,

sounding so close to guilt—

The mercenaries leaned forward, ready to pounce at the bard. “Hey, guys, let’s teach this asshole a lesson and make this little birdie sing by force—”

“I have a proposal!”

“Huh?”

Subaru’s loud voice brought their menacing postures to a clumsy halt. As the men stumbled to catch their balance, Subaru leaned in toward their upturned faces and said, “Let’s bypass that metia and get that fortune another way.”

16

A simple change in perspective was all they needed.

The fortune was hidden amid the boulders in the cave. Not by the giant iron wall, nor by a giant pyramid assembled from massive stones. The only real obstacle before them was the magic door blocking their path.

“All we need to do is carve a hole into the side and go around it. And since the bedrock isn’t too hard here, a pickax can smash through that, no problem.”

“And here I thought nobody’s stupid enough to bury his life’s fortune in a cave that flimsy,” the bearded man murmured tiredly as Subaru folded his arms and examined the excavation before them. As the bearded man’s dust-blackened forehead beaded with sweat, he thoughtfully turned to face Subaru and said, “Still…why didn’t we even consider such a simple idea?”

“Well, if you have tunnel vision, it’s easy to forget the rest of your options. I, on the other hand, live my life nitpicking everything everybody says and does. That’s the difference.”

“That’s not exactly something to brag about…” Smirking cynically over Subaru’s humblebrag, the bearded man stood up straight and got back to work. The other men in white took turns using the tools they’d brought to deepen the tunnel.

The treasure was now within reach, and this had given a huge boost to their motivation. In not much time, their tunnel around the metia would be finished.

“In the end, you’ll have your glowing retirement you always wanted. And I just got caught up in the cross fire.”

“Um…chore boy?”

As Subaru sat on a boulder, already drifting into epilogue mode, Liliana timidly spoke up to him. Both of their limbs were untied now, and they were both free. They could have left the cave if they wanted to, but feeling strange about not staying until the fortune was unearthed, they'd decided to stick around.

Besides, even though their captors had released them in one piece, they weren't exactly blameless.

"Why so meek? That's really not like you. There's a sharp rock there—why don't ya have a seat?"

"Okay…then if you'll pardon me, I'll— Eeep?! Ouch! Ow! That rock! That rock *was* sharp! The tip p-poked my butt! Oww, my butt…!"

"Don't say I didn't warn you, okay?! It's not my fault, okay?!"

As Liliana clutched her bottom and hopped around in circles, Subaru desperately covered his own ass. After a while, Liliana returned with tears in her eyes, sat on an unsharp rock, and glared at Subaru.

"It hurts. Take responsibility and gimme lots of money."

"Take responsibility for what? Besides, didn't you say something about things that will eventually disappear having no true value?"

"But I need money to live my life now," came her snobby retort. "A tummy can't get full on dreams alone, you know!"

Subaru sighed tiredly. "Dude, what happened to that noble woman who was here a minute ago? You should bring her back."

Then Liliana cast her gaze downward and said, "Chore boy… um…why did you come to my defense earlier?"

"Because I'm a man and you're a woman, of course? Sure, I could easily fantasize using you as a shield and curling up and pretending like I didn't know what was going on—but it turns out I didn't wanna do that."

"Th-that's not what I meant! I mean, the protecting-me part aside…you said it was okay for me not to sing… I'm just wondering why."

Her whispered voice was meek, like it might disappear any second. The hint of vulnerability in Liliana's barely audible voice made Subaru hum thoughtfully for a moment before he answered, "If you wanna know why, then all you gotta do is remember what I said. You didn't want to sing, so I didn't want to force you to. I'd come up with an alternative plan anyway."

"……"

"But without an alternative plan, I probably would've made you sing. I'd love to be in your corner, ride or die, but I'm not strong enough for that, and you and I aren't even that close, besides. Both choices would have opened a path for us, so I chose both. That's all."

Subaru spoke brusquely as he watched the men swing their pickaxes. Liliana followed his gaze, muttering the words "chose both…"

"These mercs are kinda pushy. They're not exactly the most upstanding, either…but they seem like they're in a tight spot. They need that money for something. And I don't get the sense it's a selfish reason."

The way the bearded man spoke, and the fiery impatience of the younger ones… It was clear everyone in the party felt trapped by something, and they needed the money to get out of it.

As the pickaxes hit the boulders with a shrill *ping*, Subaru waited anxiously for the path to clear. Not noticing all the while the whirlpool of complex emotions swimming in Liliana's eyes beside him.

All that remained was to wait for the men to cheer in victory—but just before that happened:

"After hearing everything you just said, I envy how coolheaded you are right now, Barusu."

A familiar voice called his name in an all too familiar way. Subaru flinched and whirled around. There, standing at the cave entrance in a maid's dress and covering the ragmite's illumination with one hand, was Ram.

When she saw Subaru and Liliana staring at her in shock, she sighed, shrugged, and said, "You messed up, Barusu. And only because Rem came so quickly to tell me was I able to bother dragging myself all the way out here—ignoring Master Roswaal's orders, at that."

"I really am sorry about that…but what are you doing here?"

"I looked into the rich man's manor where that songstress stayed. I had to cut my investigation short when Rem brought me the urgent news, but I'd already gathered that the men in white were the White Dragon's Scale."

Ram walked over to Subaru and Liliana, looked at the silhouettes of the men excavating the cave, and gave a snort. "The

rich man in question died a few days ago of illness. In life, he made many enemies, so his manor and fortune got repossessed here and there. That's where I learned of his involvement with the White Dragon's Scale. And this cave could be considered a sort of… summer home that the deceased visited several times in life."

"Yeah, and the treasure he hid here before he died is literally being reclaimed right now by his buddies he betrayed in the past. Karma's a funny thing."

Subaru brought Ram up to speed on what had happened on his end, to connect her intel with where they were right then. Hearing this, Ram arrived at the same conclusion as him. Looking at the working men, she said, "It's likely there are extenuating circumstances…but the actions of the White Dragon's Scale still constitute an attack on Master Roswaal, the lord of this land. They will all need to be severely punished."

"Now, not so fast. I agree with what you said, but we should hear them out first…"

Ignoring Subaru's plea for deference, Ram thrust a finger in his face and said, "Besides, your and Liliana's safety is not the only thing I need to check on here, Barusu." Subaru's eyes widened as she explained, "There were two fortunes not repossessed from the deceased's mansion. The first was the fortune the deceased locked away with a metia. It apparently took the form of a door or wall."

"Yeah, it's right over there. We've been ignoring it since we aren't opening it."

"Well, no matter. As for the second fortune—the deceased took measures to hide it before his death, and it will be a terribly troublesome thing if we don't find it."

"'Troublesome' how?"

Ram lowered her chin. And in the split second that passed before she could answer—

"_____!"

A roar shook the cave, and the men excavating it shrieked in reply.

A dust cloud rose high, and part of the wall crumbled loudly, changing the shape of the terrain before their very eyes.

Subaru gasped, freezing in terror. His eyes registered something with thick arms covered in black fur smashing the boulders.

"Didn't I tell you the other thing was troublesome?" Ram said scornfully beside him, her usual emotionless face on full display.

“The deceased ordered a rowder from the black market and it went missing.”

A roar like a semitruck’s horn—that’s what the rowder’s roar sounded like to Subaru. The rowder’s silhouette somewhat resembled a monkey. But its body was big enough to fill the entire cave, and its arms were easily twice the circumference of Subaru’s torso. If the rowder handled you gently, its arms were still likely strong enough to rip you limb from limb.

“Go back, go back, go back, go back!!!”

Grasping the situation, the bearded man barked a hasty order to retreat. As the men in white ran, their eyes straight ahead, the rowder roared behind them in pursuit—but its giant body got caught in the pathway, and it was difficult for the creature to move.

“If we let this thing get out in the open, we’re screwed!”

“This is a guard to protect his treasure even after his death. To think the treasurer who betrayed his allies would go so far as to use a metia and even a demon beast to protect his fortune… Ridiculous.”

“Stop commentating and start running!” Grabbing Ram by the arm while she grumbled with a bored look on her face, Subaru turned to lead the retreat. But just before he took his first step, he noticed something.

“Liliana?! Where did she go?!”

She was right beside him a minute ago, but now she was gone. Had she run out of the cave first, abandoning everyone else? If Subaru thought she was that coldhearted, he wouldn’t have stopped in his tracks. However—

“That idiot! What’s she doing over there?!”

After a frantic scan of the cave, Subaru clutched his head when he spotted Liliana. As the rowder’s roar bounced off the walls of the cave, Liliana ran, her tiny body tumbling through the cavern as she approached the passageway where the rowder was rampaging—to the place where the men in white had ditched their belongings to flee.

Liliana was surrounded by the booming cry of the beast and flying shards of rock that threatened to kill her with a blow to the head. She dived into the pile of belongings and desperately tore through them, looking for something.

“Ram! Follow me!”

The moment he realized what she was doing, Subaru

abandoned hesitation and began to run. And with a barked command to Ram, Subaru flew to where Liliana and the belongings were. The rowder was squirming right before his eyes: its giant body looked like it was about to burst through the narrow passageway any second.

And in this race against time where every second counted, what could Liliana possibly be searching for?

"Liliana, you idiot! Do you *want* to die?! C'mon, we have to go __"

"I can't find my lyulyre! Without it, I can't…!"

"The one you just tuned, right? If we survive this, I'll beg Roswaal to get you another one, so let's focus on getting out of here first!"

"Not the instrument—the *case*! That case… It's a keepsake from my mother!"

When he heard the sorrow in Liliana's scream, Subaru suppressed every urge to curse her out and ran his eyes over the belongings. But neither Liliana, who was flipping through all the items, nor Subaru, whose eyes were wide as saucers, could spot the lyulyre case. The lyulyre must have been taken with them on the cart when they were captured.

"You idiots! The hell are you doing?!" the bearded man cried, running over to them.

Subaru spun around, gave the bearded man a nervous glance, then he pointed to Liliana and said, "Where's her instrument?! It's in a case—you guys grabbed it when you took us, right?!"

"Her instrument…? O-oh! I think I know!"

The bearded man's face drained of color. Then he turned to look—at exactly the spot of ground under the rowder's feet. He was staring not at the excavated tunnel, but at the metia. Subaru immediately understood.

The lyulyre had been left right in front of the metia so that Liliana could sing the minute they broke her. And that's where it still was.

"Shit, this's the worst! Liliana, stay back! I'll get the lyulyre!"

"No, w-wait a minute, chore boy! It's mine, so I…!"

"Listen, dumbass! *I'm* doing this! You stay back! Oh, and my name is *Subaru Natsuki*!"

He couldn't stand her calling him *chore boy* anymore. He hoisted Liliana on his shoulders despite her struggling and hurled

her at the bearded man, who had run up to him. Subaru pointed outside as the bearded man hastily caught her, then he ran back into the cave.

Right beside the pathway he was headed toward, the half-free rowder was wildly swinging its arms at him.

"I swear, why do I always get the worst luck of the draw…?!"

He immediately regretted talking big and putting on a show. After all, the girl he wanted to put on a show for the most wasn't even around. Yet there he was, life on the line.

The rowder's thick fingertips scratched at the stone walls, trying to gouge Subaru as he ran by. Dashing just out of reach, he dodged his way through the fist-sized rocks and slid down to the metia.

"Found you!"

The lyulyre was right where Subaru landed. And as the cave began to collapse in places, the metia obediently carried out its duty without complaint. Subaru sighed in relief to see the lyulyre by his feet had escaped harm and that he had gotten there without breaking any bones.

He picked up the case and spun around to run out of the cave.

"Oof—!"

His back suddenly gave out, and he fell to his knees. Luckily for Subaru, this saved his life. A giant arm flew through the space where his head had been moments ago, smashing against the metia. As the metia repelled the inertia of the attack right back at the rowder, its howl of pain boomed through the cave.

Awakened by the sensation of his eardrums rupturing, Subaru steadied his shaking knees and ran. He ducked his head through the space between the rowder's legs, grazing against the needlelike fur as he escaped out the cave pocket.

"Bwah?!"

But just when he thought he was clear of the giant body, his face was smashed sideways by a long tail.

He tumbled and slammed against a boulder, moaning in pain. *The case—it's okay. Subaru, you dumbass.*

"This stupid thing isn't worth dying over…"

Why was he so sad? Why was he risking his life to save someone else's keepsake?

Cursing under his breath, Subaru spat out the blood pooling in his mouth. His cheek had been badly cut by that tail. It hurt a lot. The pain was actually welcome—it sharpened his senses.

“El Fulla!”

As the tail came swinging at Subaru again, a blade of wind slashed it off at the base. Spurting black blood, the tail wriggled like a snake beside Subaru as he ran.

Thanks for the assist, Ram.

He could now see the cave entrance, which Liliana and the bearded man had just reached. All Subaru needed to do was join them, and he’d meet the win condition for this level.

If only.

“Seriously, *lame*!”

The rowder, burning with rage over its maimed tail, was blocking Subaru’s way.

Now free of the narrow passageway with all four limbs swinging, the demon beast was ready for action. Standing straight, it was close to ten feet tall—tall enough for its head to scrape the cave roof.

Even with Ram’s magic helping him, normie Subaru’s prospects were grim.

As Subaru hugged the lyulyre case tight, his thoughts raced. Should he use his last-resort magic? He could disrupt the demon beast by casting Shamak, wagering that Ram would pick him up after he fainted. He hated those odds, but he had more hope in that working than getting into a fistfight with that monster.

Subaru turned to the cave entrance and looked sharply at Ram to communicate his suicidal plan. When their eyes met, the girl’s blue hair shook as she swung her arm high above her head—

“Hweh?”

Her spiked morning star twirled horrifyingly as it smashed into the side of the demon beast’s face. The blow had caught the rowder completely by surprise because it’d been so focused on Subaru.

Its head half caved in by the attack, the demon beast bled profusely from its face. It jerkily turned around, whimpering quietly as if to ask who had just killed it.

“Sorry about this.” A silvery voice answered the demon beast’s final cry with an ephemeral echo.

A pale-blue light flashed through the cave, and Subaru saw the girl with silver hair extend both arms high. Appearing in her palms was a tiny cat, its long tail swishing—

“Night night, little monkey. May you have a good, peaceful journey.”

The androgynous voice bid farewell as the pale-blue light became a forest of icicles dancing in the air. The burst of light came from every direction, hurling into the rearing rowder.

Impaled by countless icicles, the rowder roared to the ceiling. Then it opened its mouth wide in a death rattle. A thunderous *crack* rang out as it transformed into an ice statue.

For many seconds, the rush of cold air in the cave commanded silence.

Unable to believe what he had just seen, Subaru stared up at the frozen demon beast. The rowder was dead in the ice, and Subaru's life was saved.

"Subaru!"

A voice calling his name snapped Subaru out of his stupor. He turned toward the voice and saw a familiar beautiful girl waving at him. Emilia. Her eyes filled with relief, she pressed an open hand to her chest and smiled gently.

"Subaru! Are you all right? Are you hurt? I'll take a look at you right away!"

And then Rem came, stumbling over the rough cave floor, the hem of her short skirt rippling as she flew to him. Noticing a familiar weapon hanging from her hand, he finally put all the pieces together.

Apparently, Rem and Emilia had pulled a deus ex machina to save him.

"How do you guys keep arriving just in the nick of time…?"

Their timeliness had saved his life yet again. Subaru dragged his battered body over to Rem as she ran to him—

—then cracks shot through the cave ceiling, the floor, and every wall.

The fissures spread as the cave began to peel itself apart. Seeing this, Subaru felt all his hair stand on end as he pointed at the cave entrance.

"Everyone, run outside *now*—!"

Less than a minute later, the treasure cave collapsed completely.

17

"We were so worried when we found out you and Liliana were missing, but he kindly told us where you'd be. He said he knew."

Emilia smiled sheepishly and pointed to a lone young man who was twirling around in circles. It was Liliana's stalker, Kiritaka, who was supposed to be restrained but instead had gone down on one knee and presented a bouquet (Who knew where he got it?) to Liliana.

"I am Kiritaka, your love slave. For you, my beloved, I would run through fire, swim through oceans, or brave any demon beast's cave. Ohh, thank heavens you are safe!"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you *didn't* run into the cave, right?"

"*Mrrrf!* Th-that was only because those young ladies had me tied up outside…" Kiritaka sputtered an excuse as Liliana stared coldly down at him.

Who would have guessed that he of all people would have played a part in solving the crisis?

"The hairpiece he gave to Lady Liliana as a token of his affection is part of a paired metia," Rem explained. "Apparently, if each person has one of the two, they'll know where the other is, no matter how far apart they are."

"So it's a transmitter." Subaru snorted. "Nothing screams *stalker* more than that."

In part, the man's obsessive infatuation had saved them. Horrifying.

After Subaru and Liliana were discovered missing, Emilia and the others had immediately launched a search. But it was Kiritaka and Ram who had given them the breakthroughs they needed.

There was a connection between Kiritaka's metia and Ram's investigation findings. The pair met up at the secret hideout and then at the cave, where they came upon that life-threatening scene.

"Master Roswaal said that given his cooperation, Kiritaka may be acquitted—provided he agrees never to trouble others with his romantic courtships again. Though from the way he forces his feelings upon Lady Liliana, I don't see that happening," Rem

explained.

“It pisses me off, but he did save us… I still don’t wanna thank him, though,” Subaru grumbled.

Rem was busy at work healing Subaru’s injuries. But between her close proximity and the soft touch of her hands, Subaru was having a hard time concentrating on the healing.

“But our real problem is those people over there, yes?”

While Subaru smiled sheepishly over Rem’s not so subtle attempts at touching him, Emilia glanced toward the cave. There stood the battered men in white.

The cave was completely buried in dirt, so carrying out the fortune was now impossible. The rowder was the cause of the cave-in. Even if they had disarmed the metia, the outcome would have been the same. In fact, without Subaru and his allies there, the men in white wouldn’t have been able to put down the demon beast. Worst-case scenario, they would have been wiped out. The fact that they were alive now was perhaps cause for some celebration.

“But the reality remains…it’s really hard for them to be grateful they’re alive.”

The bearded man had finally confessed to Subaru why the members of the White Dragon’s Scale needed that money. The home village of the founding members of the White Dragon’s Scale was plagued by an endemic disease. They needed the money to purify the contaminated soil that was the cause of it.

The disease first broke out several years ago, and the infected slowly turned to stone. It was a rare disease, a demonic plague that’d been caused by a demon beast contaminating the soil.

“Traces of a black serpent…sowing disease with wild abandon…,” Emilia muttered bitterly. Subaru felt equally gutted.

The demon beast plague could only be cured by purifying the soil it contaminated. The process required a large number of colorless magic stones, which would cost a fortune to buy.

The men in white had managed to earn that fortune only to have it stolen by a traitor, and their last hope was now buried beneath the rubble.

The mercenaries had family in that village. This was the cause of the desperation and anger burning in the young men’s hearts. And the distant look in the bearded man’s eyes was for his family, who had already passed away.

But it was all too late now. Their hopes were dashed, and there

was no way for them to save their community now…

"How about this? I shall take the gentlemen of the White Dragon's Scale into my service. And as for the contaminated soil, the Muse Company shall provide the necessary funding and materials to purify the land."

"What?!" With a hysterical shriek, Subaru's jaw dropped in shock over the proposal coming from the last person he expected.

Emilia, Rem, and the White Dragon's Scale members in question were similarly stupefied.

Kiritaka gazed up at the sky, twirled his moustache, and said, "Luckily, my Muse Company's primary product is magic stone. Colorless ones are rather pricey, but it would not be too difficult to gather enough for your needs. Also, my firm is currently seeking extra security to protect our interests, so I believe this is a win-win for everyone."

"D…d…dude…just how many brownie points are you trying to earn here?"

"If the woman he loves begs for help, helping her is a man's most cherished desire. And I have many points of sympathy for these men's circumstances. As they say, mercy goes around and comes around."

I think that's supposed to be Those who are kind benefit themselves.

As casual as he was about helping others, Kiritaka currently looked like a messiah. Funny how he'd looked like nothing more than an infatuated idiot at first. (Well, not to say he wasn't still an idiot.)

But something in Kiritaka's speech rang a bell in Subaru's mind.

"Did you ask him to do this, Liliana?"

"……Yes," Liliana answered meekly, looking down and hugging her lyulyre case. "I felt bad for rejecting them earlier without even hearing them out."

In the cart, in the cave, when the men desperately threatened her, Liliana had refused to cooperate. But if she felt guilty for that, then Subaru was just as guilty. Besides, even if she had sung and unlocked the metia, the demon beast still had to be dealt with. The cave would have still collapsed, too.

"Chore boy—I had a realization. All my life, I just assumed that as a bard, I would travel the world alone, live alone, sing alone, and die alone. But it shouldn't be that way. Every time I pass through a

place, somebody who hears my songs *feels* something. And that feeling will never disappear… I've realized the world won't leave me behind."

"Do you regret not compromising your pride?" Subaru asked.

Liliana looked up and answered, smiling, "I regret not realizing that there are more important things in this world than pride." She held out the lyulyre for Subaru to admire, fondly caressing the case as she said, "Thank you very much for saving my lyulyre."

"Sure thing. You owe me."

"Indeed I do. I'd love to repay you somehow…"

As Liliana looked up at him with doe eyes, Subaru fell into thought. Subaru had risked his life to save something precious to her. His reward would need to be equal to that.

And so Subaru decided.

"Sing for me, Liliana."

"Huh…?"

"I'm exhausted, and I thought I was gonna die, but everyone survived. All the problems are mostly resolved. So we need a melodramatic credits scene. And you can't have credits without a song."

"The muse has spoken. I present you with my new song—'The Day I Hit My Head, My Last Day as a Sane Person.'"

"Shut up!"

She had slipped an odd remark into her song title, but he had already seen it coming. He'd said risking his life was worth as much as a song. It seemed insane, and it was, but he was fine being insane.

"All right, then. I'll sing a tune for you—'The Sky Outstripping the Sunrise.'"

Plucking the strings of her lyulyre, Liliana welcomed the morning sun rising over the distant mountain, bringing with it a new day.

The high chain of notes wove a melody that shook the soul. The introduction melted into the cold morning air. And as the fantasia began, the eyes of the listeners naturally gravitated toward the singer. And then—

—her voice soared high, high into the sky.

A new, busy morning pushed the night away. It was met by the melody and Liliana's singing voice. The birds harmonized with her, and even the wind seemed to join in.

Before Subaru realized it, unbearable emotions had welled up inside him, escaping as a lone tear rolling down his cheek.

It was the same with Emilia…with Rem…and with Kiritaka, who was writhing on the ground.

And the members of the White Dragon's Scale who had tried to use her song as a tool to break open the metia also burst into tears when they heard her sing.

That should teach you, Subaru thought. And his message probably reached them.

For a story rife with ridiculous coincidences, a song made for a fittingly ridiculous ending.

Was the shaking of their souls, the hot tears rolling down their cheeks, a fitting match for a risked life?

That question was meaningless—it needed not be asked of anyone there.

18

"Are you sure you wanna go with Kiritaka and company?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I am at least partially responsible for the debt the gentlemen of the White Dragon's Scale owe. So I figured…that I ought to stay with them, at least until they've paid off their debt."

Two days after the string of crises were resolved, Liliana had packed her bags and happily announced her next destination. Everyone at Roswaal Manor urged her to stay with them many times, but Liliana firmly declined.

It was Liliana's suggestion that Kiritaka employ the White Dragon's Scale, so she felt it was her duty to see the arrangement through. Her stubborn resolve could be swayed by no one.

"Well, I imagine that Kiritaka was jumping for joy when you made that decision, but you don't need to martyr yourself like that… I can't guarantee your chastity. Better let the bearded guy protect you."

"Oh, that's the plan, I assure you. When you're living with a hungry beast, always come prepared. Good thing the gentlemen of the White Dragon's Scale are all slaves to my music now!"

Clapping and dancing Liliana was right—she had completely won over the mercenaries with her songs. That was just how impactful her recital by the cave had been. Liliana had also played a big part in getting them the funds they needed to save their home

village. To the members of the White Dragon's Scale, Liliana was basically their goddess. They treated her with overwhelming respect after she made her promise.

Subaru had seen the way their goddess's nostrils flared whenever they showered her with adoration; he couldn't help but feel the *goddess* label was ever so slightly undeserved.

"Well, I'm going to *really* miss you, Liliana. Do come visit again sometime."

"Of course, Lady Emilia! I owe a great debt to you and your people. When we meet again, I insist on singing you a new song. And I do look forward to sampling some new cakes as well. *Gee-hee-hee…*"

"Could you *be* any less ladylike?" Subaru jabbed at the girl as she cackled, drool dribbling down her chin.

Everyone had gathered in front of Roswaal Manor to say goodbye to Liliana. Since Rem and Emilia in particular loved Liliana's songs, they were taking the parting rather hard. Even Beatrice, to Subaru's surprise, had stepped out of the mansion for a moment to bid farewell.

Liliana had only stayed with them a few days, but those days had been a rich (albeit hectic) experience. So rich that everyone felt a pang of loneliness over the thought that they wouldn't hear her sing the next day.

"Still, I feel like Roswaal missed the mark. Since he didn't insist on keeping Liliana here, I can only assume that means he's given up on the idea to use her for Emilia-tan's PR."

It was oddly satisfying to see things not go according to Roswaal's plans, but Subaru was a little upset that he wouldn't hear Liliana sing Emilia's praises. Maybe more than a little.

As Subaru sulked to himself over that, Liliana murmured, "C'mere, c'mere," and gestured to him.

"What's up? Beako wanted to say something to you, but she's still fidgeting over there. Go help her out."

"Of course I'll do that, but I wanted to talk to you first."

Setting the fidgeting Beatrice aside for the moment, Liliana stood on tiptoe to whisper in Subaru's ear. "You see, the marquis presented me with a direct proposal. He says Emilia is going to be in the spotlight during this royal-selection thingy. That's why you guys let me stay with you, huh!"

"Y-yeah…so you knew about that all this time? Well, I guess

you would. So why're you bringing this up now?"

In response to Roswaal's shrewd arrangements, Liliana boldly pounded her chest and announced, "Weeeell! I've accepted the job, of course! It need not be stated just how beautiful, how noble Lady Emilia's heart is. And most of all, when you see that Great Spirit of hers, how can you possibly *not* break out into song?!"

"Wait, that feline fairy is what clinched the deal? But that's just your typical cat who sleeps all day."

Subaru had a difficult time accepting that Puck was the biggest factor, but he was happy to hear that Liliana had said yes. He looked forward to the day when he could hear her play her new hero's epic.

"So I guess it's good-bye for now then," he said.

"Yes, it seems that way. But get excited—I'm gonna sing you the best song ever!"

Tapping her lyulyre case, Liliana shot him a smile brimming with confidence. To see her that dedicated to her personal goal was a beautiful thing indeed.

"Oh, one more thing…"

Just when he thought their conversation had reached a satisfying conclusion, Liliana's cheeks turned red. He could clearly feel the excitement radiating from her from the way she looked earnestly up at him. Then after a moment's hesitation, Liliana said, "Someday, I hope you'll let me sing *your* hero's epic—*Subaru Natsuki*."

Subaru stopped breathing.

"Sorry I giggled and pretended I didn't hear it the first time you told me your name. Rem was absolutely right. You're destined to become a hero someday."

With a smile at Subaru, Liliana shyly turned her back and trotted off. As Subaru watched her exchange parting words with Beatrice, he finally exhaled the breath he'd been holding in.

"Subaru…what's wrong? Your face is *really* red," Emilia said, appearing suddenly beside Subaru and peering at his face.

Subaru slapped a nervous hand to his cheek. Hating that his cheek was still hot, he shook his head and cried, "*Ngha*!"

"Hee-hee, you're being silly." Emilia giggled into her hand.

The two stood side by side, exchanging smiles. Their stories would one day be sung by Liliana the Songstress.

But for today, they were just Subaru Natsuki and Emilia.

<Fin>

THE HEAD MAID'S RESTLESS DAY OF REST

1

There was no special reason that brought Subaru to a certain realization.

"Huh? What happened to the cart that was just here…?"
"Oh, I cleared it all up while you were away, Subaru."
"Oh, okay. Thanks, Rem."

"Huh? Where's the lawn tools? I thought I brought them out…"
"Oh, I had a spare moment, so I did that chore for you."
"Oh, really? Wow, thanks for always helping me, Rem."

"Huh? I was gonna help set the table for supper, but…"
"Oh, don't worry about that, Subaru. Just have a seat."
"For real? Dang, I don't even need to be in this story. That's my Rem."

"Huh? Where's that writing homework Ram assigned to me…?"
"Oh, don't worry, Subaru, I mimicked your handwriting and finished it for you."
"…D-did you? That's… Hmmm… That seems off somehow. Er, not that I don't appreciate it, of course."

2

"I think we should give Rem a day where she can just rest and do nothing."

At the breakfast table, Subaru waited for everyone to be present before he raised this proposal. The other five sitting at the table widened their eyes in surprise. The most surprised of all was the

girl with distinctive blue hair—Rem.

She froze at her spot beside Subaru's seat, where she was serving food, and her head gave the most adorable tilt of confusion.

"A day…of rest? Um…oh dear, have I done something to offend you? So you want to punish me by not letting me wor—"

"Er, no, Rem. That's not what I'm saying at all. If anything, I have nothing to complain about your job performance—you're almost *too* perfect."

"Hmm—?"

Even after Subaru's explanation, Rem's eyes were still filled with question marks. Her complete lack of awareness of the concept of overwork was a testament to the sinfulness of her master and those around him.

Feeling sorry for Rem, Subaru reached over and patted her head. She had recently taken a liking to this, and even though she didn't know the reason why she was receiving such affection, she accepted it unconditionally with a soft smile.

"Soooo let me take a stab at what you're saying. You, Subaru, wish for me to reconsider the way I treat my staff. Did I get that riiiight?"

While Subaru patted Rem's head, Roswaal, the master of the house, correctly guessed his intent. The marquis was wearing his usual white-based clown makeup that morning, his purple lips twisting into a warm smile.

"Well, it's not exactly a complaint, but it's close to one," Subaru answered.

"How daring of you, Barusu. How can you be so rude to Master Roswaal? A servant is far too lowly to complain to his master. And you are *twice* as lowly as that, Barusu." Irked by Subaru voicing his opinion directly to Roswaal, the already cold Ram gave Subaru an extra-icy rebuke.

"I could do without the special treatment, Ram. But do you really not have any thoughts on the matter?" He frowned judgmentally at the maid, who worshipped the ground Roswaal walked on, and continued, "Rem works too hard… Or rather, all the staff in this mansion relies on Rem too much. It's just too cruel."

"Oh, I don't think so," Ram said, shaking her head adamantly.

Subaru sighed. "Okay, then…who made this breakfast?"

"Rem did."

"Who woke up first this morning to do the basic cleaning and

air out the place?"

"Rem did."

"And who wakes you up, helps you get dressed, and brushes your teeth?"

"Rem does."

"How have you gotten this far in the conversation without feeling ashamed?! What are you, *royalty*?!"

"Oh, I am not that exalted."

"That wasn't a compliment!"

Subaru emitted a tired sigh at Ram's smug insolence and pressed a hand to his forehead. It was then that somebody who hadn't participated in the conversation thus far raised her hand from her seat at the left side of Subaru and asked, "May I say something?"

She was a beautiful girl with silky silver hair and a voice like bells. Long lashes quivered above her amethyst eyes as she gazed at Subaru—it was Emilia.

She looked over at Subaru and Rem and said, "Okay, it's very clear that Rem works *really* hard…but don't the rest of you work hard, too, Subaru? Why do you want to give just Rem some time off?"

"Emilia-tan, I appreciate your concern, but real talk, this is a matter of workload and difficulty level. I was just thinking, in that regard, Rem works much harder than Ram and me."

"You surprise me, Barusu. A useless half-wit like you, I can understand, but *I* accomplish every task I'm given efficiently. Don't lump me in with you."

"How can you say that when you only do the same workload as a half-wit like me?! For that matter, what were things like before I got here? Did you sisters used to split up the work I do now?"

"Now that's a stupid question, Barusu. Rem did it."

"Um, maybe you're just oblivious, but *nothing* about what you just said is good, okay?"

Setting aside Ram, who was being impossible, Subaru turned to face the person who should be most involved in these negotiations —Roswaal. The master of the house seemed amused when he gestured for Subaru to continue.

"If you'll let me backtrack a little," Subaru said, "I've got more examples of Rem's reverse-special treatment. Take that demon beast scare we just had. You know, that crisis we averted without

casualties no thanks to you, Rozchi?"

Subaru was referring to the crisis that had transpired not long ago. There was an attack at Earlham Village by some urugarum, demon beasts that lived in the forest. They had miraculously managed to get by with no deaths and only a few injuries.

Secretly, however, Subaru had actually tasted the anguish of death several times, but that could be conveniently omitted.

"I *did* promise a reward for solving that crisis," the marquis replied. "Now, given the contents of the reward you requested, Subaru, I suppose it doesn't feel real to you juuuust yet."

"Yeah, and, um…well, I do appreciate that."

He shot a sideways glance at Emilia before murmuring his thanks to Roswaal. Emilia gave him a curious look: she didn't know what Subaru's reward was. He didn't want her to know about all the arrangements he'd made for their date. He thought it was important that it seemed like he had prepared the flower field and the garland of flowers all by himself.

"Forget about my reward. It's just…if you gave me a reward for resolving that crisis, don't you owe Rem and Ram a reward, too?"

"Are you saying I should give the same special treatment to my staff that I would give to a guest like you? That is a rather luuuudicrous request, if you ask me."

"Okay, my guest status aside, is there any reason *not* to reward them? Besides, this is a great opportunity to be generous and get a likability boost from your servants. Max out their loyalty stats! Doesn't that sound appealing to you, Master?"

As Subaru leaned in for the kill, Roswaal smiled and muttered, "Loyalty, eh?" with a sideways glance at Ram. Seeing the latter bow in reply to his glance, Subaru remembered one of his servants already had her loyalty stats maxed out and realized his playful speech had failed epically.

"You thwart me every which way I go, Ram."

"Don't even try to shake my or Rem's loyalty to Master Roswaal, Barusu. Besides, from that declaration you just made, it would be perfectly acceptable to restrain you on suspicion of being a spy sent here to sow internal discord."

"Wow, show a little mercy for your fellow survivor of that shitshow!"

Even though they had managed to achieve some impressive levels of cooperation, it hadn't influenced his likability with Ram in

the slightest. If anything, she was downright adversarial. Subaru was at a loss for what to say. However…

"But you knoooow, I don't particularly see any reason to write off Subaru's opinion, either."

"Master Roswaal…"

"Don't look so disappointed, Ram. I am noooot conceding the point. I'm simply saying Subaru's point has merit. That crisis in the village was practically an oversight on my part. If I don't offer even a little reward to those who so deftly resolved the crisis, people will start calling me an ungracious nobleman."

"May I have your favorite quill as a reward, Master Roswaal?" Ram asked promptly.

"Somebody sure changed her tune on a dime!" Subaru groaned.

Roswaal obligingly handed Ram the quill in his breast pocket. Ram took it reverently, hugged it softly to her chest, and stepped back.

Nevertheless, Subaru had neutralized one of his final obstacles. He had gotten Roswaal's approval, and Ram had backed off. The rest would be easy. All he had to do now was convince the person in question—Rem.

"Subaru?"

Rem, who had spent the entire conversation letting Subaru pat her head, blinked and looked at him.

"Seems like I won the right to a reward for us workers. All right, tell me any wish you've got. As long as it isn't something that's beyond Rozchi's wealth or power, he'll make it happen somehow!"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't get her hopes toooo high."

Subaru saw a clown cackle out of the corner of his eye, but he forced that from his mind. He focused instead on Rem, whose cheeks were noticeably pink as she smiled softly at him.

"Thank you so much, Subaru. But I am content just working here in this fine house with my sister and you. I need nothing more."

"But that makes this entire conversation pointless!"

Technically, Ram was coming out ahead with her new quill.

Kindness and unselfishness were virtues, but the inability to express a desire when prompted had to be a vice. A vice of the people who'd made her that way, and of the girl who didn't recognize her own desolation.

“Okay, how about we do the first thing Subaru suggested?” Clapping her hands, Emilia ended the conversation gridlock with an idea. “Hearing what you all were saying just now made me reflect a bit on my actions. I was relying on Rem’s help a little too much. And if I feel this way, then it’s only natural that as her colleagues, Ram and Subaru would feel the same.”

Emilia looked to Subaru for support, and he eagerly nodded yes.

“That’s why I’m in favor of giving Rem a reward,” Emilia continued. “But Rem says she doesn’t want a reward…and I can’t help but think that isn’t right.”

“Okay, but what are we going to do about it?” Subaru asked.

“I think it pains Roswaal very much to not give Rem a reward when she deserves one. Now, it’s not Rem’s intention to hurt his feelings—she’s a kind person—but it’s important for a master to reward good work…,” Emilia said profoundly. She then stuck her tongue out, smiled sheepishly, and added, “I read that in a book once.”

When Rem gave her a slightly startled stare in response, Emilia continued, “Don’t tell us you don’t want anything. Please think of something. You do so much for us. We just want to return the favor. I know it might be difficult for you, but please try.”

“Lady Emilia…”

Rem’s eyes had been opened, figuratively and otherwise. And Subaru, who hadn’t stated his case with that much logical precision, was enamored by Emilia’s speech.

“Okay, so let’s say we go with Barusu’s original suggestion. How do we proceed, exactly?”

Stashing her quill in her pocket, Ram regained her composure and posed the question to the group. Emilia raised a finger and simply answered, “Oh, that’s easy. Asking Rem to think about what she wants will be difficult for her. Since she’s always so busy with work, she has little time to stop and mull it over. That’s why I propose we give her a day off to rest and figure out what she wants for her reward.”

“Ohhh. Good idea.” Pleased to hear she had put more thought into it than he had, Subaru eagerly seconded Emilia’s motion. From their nodding, Ram and Roswaal also seemed on board. There were no signs of dissent.

All that remained was to get Rem’s opinion.

“Lady Emilia…I truly appreciate your consideration. I am ashamed at how thoughtless I’ve been. However, giving me a reward and a day off seems excessive. All I’ve done is caused you worry day in and day out. Besides, this house needs me…”

Rem looked down, murmuring disclaimer after disclaimer. But Subaru caught a glimpse of the confident, unyielding stubbornness in her voice. She would not be convinced. So instead, he commanded—

“Rem.”

“Yes? Um, Subaru, I don’t—”

“Take a day off.”

“All right, Subaru, if you insist!”

That settled it.

3

Since they were still at breakfast, Rem’s day off could not commence then and there. Subaru suggested she have the entirety of the next day off, but Rem refused, saying that was far too much.

“And so we’re going to divvy up the chores for today. For one thing, Rem won’t have a very restful day off if we mess up her work, and for another, by experiencing firsthand the tasks Rem does on the daily, we should gain newfound appreciation and gratitude for her from here on. This is a very meaningful little project.”

After forcing Rem to retire to her personal quarters, Subaru took the reins and marched to the front of the room to go over his plan. After he was finished, Emilia was the first to raise her hand.

“Subaru, may I ask a question?”

“Of course, Emilia-tan. And I love the modest way you raised your hand. What is it?”

“So I am *really* on board with giving Rem a day off and everything else you suggested just now…but you might need to do a little more explaining to convince everyone besides me.”

Emilia touched a finger to her lip and glanced sideways. Assembled here was the entire staff of Roswaal Manor except Rem. In other words, aside from servants Subaru and Ram, there were also the masters of the house.

One of them in particular had a very sour look on her face.

“Look, you’ll have to stop scowling eventually. You didn’t want

to participate in the conversation, so you're not allowed to be a wet blanket now."

"I wonder…why did you assume that I would cooperate in the first place? I find that to be the much bigger mystery here," said a tiny figure sitting in a chair and staring at Subaru. Her cream-colored rolls of hair and her fancy dress were dead giveaways that she was Beatrice.

While she'd been present at the breakfast table, she made a habit of never getting involved with household matters. Subaru knew she wouldn't be cooperative on this matter, which was exactly why he had decided to bring it up at breakfast, when she couldn't ignore it.

And just as anticipated, Beatrice was trying to deny any responsibility.

"Come on, you know Rem does a *lot* for you on the daily. Just who do you think changed your sheets and panties when you wet the bed?"

"And exactly what gives you the right to say that, I wonder?! When did I *ever* make such an unladylike mistake?! You should keep your delusional ramblings in check!"

"Funny how you deny it so hard. So you really did—"

"Take that look off your face! Of course I didn't wet the bed!"

He had only meant to tease her a little, but when his jab immediately resulted in a tantrum, he couldn't contain his curiosity. Subaru set Beatrice aside for the moment and looked at his other primary concern in the room.

"Barusu, if you have a justification for this wild proposal, then you had better share it now."

Only Ram could have such fiery eyes while the rest of her face stayed cold as ice. In a way, she was the person whose cooperation Subaru needed the most to carry out his plan. And the reason for her sour mood could only be one thing.

"No justification. It's exactly as I explained before. Giving Rem a day off will put a hole in our work schedule. Everyone needs to work together to help fill that hole."

"Then I wish you would at least not rope Master Roswaal into it. Master Roswaal already works harder than Rem on daily basis."

"Is what your secretary said true?"

Subaru looked past the smooth-talking maid to Roswaal, who was rocking in his chair next to her. The marquis closed one eye

and used the yellow one to gaze at Subaru before saying, “Yes, I suppoooose I do. For a man of many responsibilities, busying myself over small household tasks wouldn’t exactly be worthy of praise. Ram is correct. I may not look it, but I am a very busy person.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“However, experiencing the harsh working conditions of one’s staff is not at all a bad thing. To determine whether the workload justifies the pay, you see.”

“Master Roswaal, do you mean…?”

Unlike stubborn Ram, the liberal-minded Roswaal seemed rather gung ho about this arrangement. Though in his case, it was most likely because he thought it sounded entertaining.

“There, you gotta respect your master’s wishes, Ram. ‘*A servant is far too lowly to complain to his master*,’ remember?”

“Stupid Barusu. Don’t get cocky just because things went your way one time.”

As Ram bitterly withdrew her objection, there was an abnormal gleam in her eyes. Subaru smiled sheepishly at her dagger eyes and nodded to acknowledge her opinion.

“Okay, let’s get back to the topic at hand. First, we need to divvy up the big tasks: meals, laundry, and cleaning…”

“Did you not hear a word I said?! I suppose you didn’t hear me say I would not cooperate?!”

“Agh, god, you guys are so annoying,” Subaru grumbled at the whining Beatrice. “Emilia-tan, a little help?”

“Um, what was the line again? *Can’t your eyes see this seal*…?”

After reciting part of the famous line from the historical drama *Mito Komon*, Emilia extended her hand. The gray ball of fur sitting atop it sensed that it was his turn to speak and twitched his pink nose. This was none other than Emilia’s contracted spirit and anti-Beatrice weapon, the cat spirit Puck.

“Betty.”

“Er… Hi, Puckie. You look so cute today…”

“Thanks. So it’s like this, Betty. I get where you’re coming from, but I also get where Subaru’s coming from. Besides, I kinda think one of our duties as spirits is to sometimes be generous to people.”

Puck’s serene phrasing made Beatrice’s blue eyes waver a little. While she obeyed Puck on principle, after the fuss she’d put up, it would damage her ego to yield so quickly.

“Y-your words are wise, I suppose. B-but I—”

“Betty…*please*?”

“Well, if you insist, Puckie, then I suppose I can’t say no!”

“Man, you are too easy,” Subaru said in disbelief.

Now that the Beatrice problem had been resolved, all opposition had been eliminated. All that remained was to divvy up Rem’s tasks.

“Okay, how should we tackle her workload?”

“Like we were saying, with Puck included, there’s six of us. If we split into three groups of two, we should be able to handle most of her work no problem. Let’s see, our pairs will be…”

It was then that two of the objectors shot some terribly intense looks at Subaru. He nodded, knowing what it was they both wanted to say.

“Ram with Rozchi. Beako with Puck. Me with Emilia-tan. How does that sound?”

“Well, I’m fine with it, but…are you sure Puck and Beatrice will be okay together?”

“Aww, you’re such a worrywart, Lia. Don’t worry about me. I’ll use every advantage my tiny stature has to offer and rescue all the fallen coins from under the furniture.”

“That’s such a specific role.”

Subaru didn’t know why Puck was so gung ho about looking for loose change, but he wasn’t about to start nitpicking. Better that Puck stuck to the furniture and stayed out of the kitchen. He didn’t want fur in his food.

“Beako, would you rather tackle dusting or laundry?”

“If those are my two options, then my magic will be better suited to laundry, I suppose.”

“Good call. Better wash all those soiled panties you hid around your room while you’re at it.”

“For the last time, I *didn’t* wet the bed!”

After offering a few consoling words, it was decided that Puck and Beatrice would be on laundry duty.

All that remained were meals and dusting.

“Master Roswaal and I will handle the cooking,” Ram announced.

“That’s fine with me, but why?”

“If we work in the kitchen, then I needn’t worry about bothering or troubling Master Roswaal with my ineptitude. Worst-case scenario, if you were served vegetable scraps for dinner, you’d

eat it, wouldn't you, Barusu?"

"I was born in the Year of the Rabbit, but I'm not a vegetarian," Subaru argued. Ram laughed it off with a snort.

Still, with Rem out of the lineup, the next most reliable person in the mansion for housework was undeniably Ram—especially when it came to cooking, where success or failure lay heavily in the food's flavor. Putting Ram in charge of food was not a terribly unwise decision. If nothing else, Ram had her secret weapon: steamed sweet potatoes. And while Roswaal's culinary abilities were concerning, Subaru was certain that there would be something edible on the table.

"Okay, so by process of elimination, that means Emilia-tan and I are handling the dusting. It will be a long, hard battle, but will you all have faith and follow me?"

"Understood. I'll try *really* hard to make sure I don't step on your toes, Subaru." Emilia pumped her fist to show him she was ready.

"God, stop being so sweet and adorable." Subaru nodded, satisfied with his partner's reassuring demeanor. "Okay, now that we know what we're doing, let's split up and get to it. Puck and Beako, follow me, and I'll take you to where we keep all the dirty laundry. And…"

Before he dismissed everyone, Subaru turned to look toward the entrance to the dining hall. From a thin crack in the door, he saw a girl with blue hair cautiously peering in at them.

"…Rem, this might be hard for you, but your assignment is a hardcore day of lying around and doing nothing."

"Yes, I understand that, but I'm just…well, worried."

"That's the workaholic in you talking, Rem. Today is your day—Rem Day. Take it from a professional slob like me: If you wanna do nothing all day, I highly recommend spending the day in bed."

"But why? Isn't that a waste of time?" Emilia interjected.

"Exactly! You're *supposed* to waste time on your day off!" Subaru answered, feeling like somebody just stabbed a knife in his chest. Meanwhile, Rem was still hovering by the dining-hall door and didn't seem like she was ready to leave anytime soon. "Okay, first off, don't wear a maid's uniform on your day off. If you're gonna laze about, you've gotta dress the part. I command you to put on some sweats and dive right into bed!"

"Um, but maid uniforms are the only clothes I have…"

“Ack! That’s right, you mentioned that before! I can’t believe you were being totally serious! You’re a teenage girl! That’s just beyond tragic.”

Subaru realized that he had indeed never seen Ram nor Rem wear anything but maid uniforms. They apparently slept in nightgowns, but those were things you only wore behind closed doors.

“Well, that’s no good. You’ll have to get yourself some proper clothes eventually. For today, try to pick your most comfortable maid uniform.”

“Understood. I’ll change into my day-off maid’s uniform.”

“You have a uniform for *days off*?!”

They seemed to have a maid uniform for every occasion—fighting, working, outings—but there was no logical reason why they had to be restricted to maid uniforms.

Anyhow, the moment Rem walked out of the room with painful reluctance, *Rem Day* commenced.

“Okay! Teams, report to your stations and carry out your tasks with all the spirit you can muster! If we make Rem think the house will fall apart the moment she stops working, everything will have been for nothing!”

“Aye, captain!” Emilia cried energetically, raising a fist.

The others answered in their own way after an awkward delay, making for a rocky start to the day.

4

And now that she finally had a day off, Rem spent it in a state of unease greater than anything she had felt before.

“Oh, Sister… Subaru… Will they really be all right without my help?”

Back in her room, Rem changed into her day-off uniform as per Subaru’s orders and proceeded to wander aimlessly in circles. She simply couldn’t sit still.

To Rem, work was basically her whole purpose in life. And while she felt fatigue just like anybody else, the fact remained that this unexpected day off did anything but soothe her soul.

“I think I’ll go check up on them after all.”

Though Rem appeared calm and steady on the surface, it was actually quite a feat of endurance for her to stay in her room this

long. This whole time, a sense of foreboding had been building in her ample chest. She soon emerged from her room, made sure the coast was clear, then started wandering around the mansion.

"If I recall correctly, Sister and Master Roswaal are on kitchen duty, so I know where they'll be…"

First, she decided to check on her other half, the one she trusted most to get things done—Ram. Though she had a tendency to be lazy, Ram was actually more detail-oriented and responsible than Rem when it came to work. At least, that's what Rem thought. And she hadn't questioned Ram's judgment when she chose to take on the cooking.

She insisted to herself that she still wasn't questioning Ram's judgment… She was merely a hundred times more worried about her sister than usual.

Taking care not to make any sound, she walked across the carpet that lined the corridor on the ground floor of the manor's main wing. Some appetizing aromas wafted over from the kitchen at the end of the corridor. Rem glided silently toward the entrance.

"Master Roswaal, I'm sorry all this happened today. I will give Barusu a stern talking-to later… Yes, *very* stern."

Just before she leaned over to peek inside, Ram's threatening voice stopped her in her tracks. Ram strictly avoided showing emotion in front of others, but as they had known each other since birth, Rem could deduce her sister's emotional state from even the slightest fluctuations in her voice.

And from the long years of honing her sister sensor, Rem could tell that Ram was furious. Rem hadn't seen anything like it in years.

Chancing a quick glance inside, Rem caught Ram peeling vegetables with fiery wrath in her eyes. As Ram's skilled hands operated the knife, the vegetables shed their skins like magic.

"Oh, you neeeedn't overreact, my dear. I believe it is quite important for me to experience what the typical workday is like for my staff. And Subaru moooost certainly did not force me into this."

Roswaal was leisurely leaning against the kitchen wall while he watched Ram work from behind. With a wave of his fingers, the pot sitting on the surface that was powered by a fire magic stone shook, filling the kitchen with a steamy aroma that spilled out into the hallway.

Ram cut up the ingredients while Roswaal watched the pot. Ram was clearly doing more work, but considering their positions,

Roswaal had already made quite a large compromise. Rem knew that Ram was probably dying to take care of everything herself and let Roswaal sit down.

"You're far too soft on Barusu, Master. If you indulge in his misguided ideas, he'll give you a hard time. Look at what he did today—"

"Weeeell then, Ram, do you think it was misguided to let Rem have the day off?"

"I…I just think we should let Rem do what she wants."

"I have noticed she has been quite enthusiastic with her woooork as of late. But there's a fine line between enthusiasm and strain. Moreover, I think we're going in the correct direction here."

As Roswaal spoke, Ram shut her mouth, and Rem strained her ears. Hearing them talking about her made Rem feel oddly self-conscious. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop on them. This made her no better than a common thief.

"I should go…"

Ram and Roswaal were a dependable team, especially given their many years together. There was no worry they might butt heads. Rem pulled herself away from the kitchen door to leave. But then—

"Rem will always be my sweet baby sister. Just because her way of thinking has changed, that won't change how I act around her—or how I'll always love her."

"Well, leeeet's just leave it at that then, shall we?"

Rem softly pressed a hand to her chest when she heard what Ram said. She took one final glance in the kitchen and found Roswaal gazing back at her.

He said nothing, only winking silently at her before turning away.

Her master was being discreet for her sake, so Rem quietly turned back to the hallway and left the kitchen behind her. Perhaps Roswaal had known she'd been outside all along. If so, maybe he had steered the conversation so Rem would hear how Ram truly felt about her.

"Thank you…Master Roswaal."

After saying a word of gratitude to Roswaal, Rem headed to her next destination.

Next, she would check in on Puck and Beatrice in the laundry room. In a way, they were the most unexpected pairing of the lot.

“Ordinarily, I’d expect to find them by the fountain…”

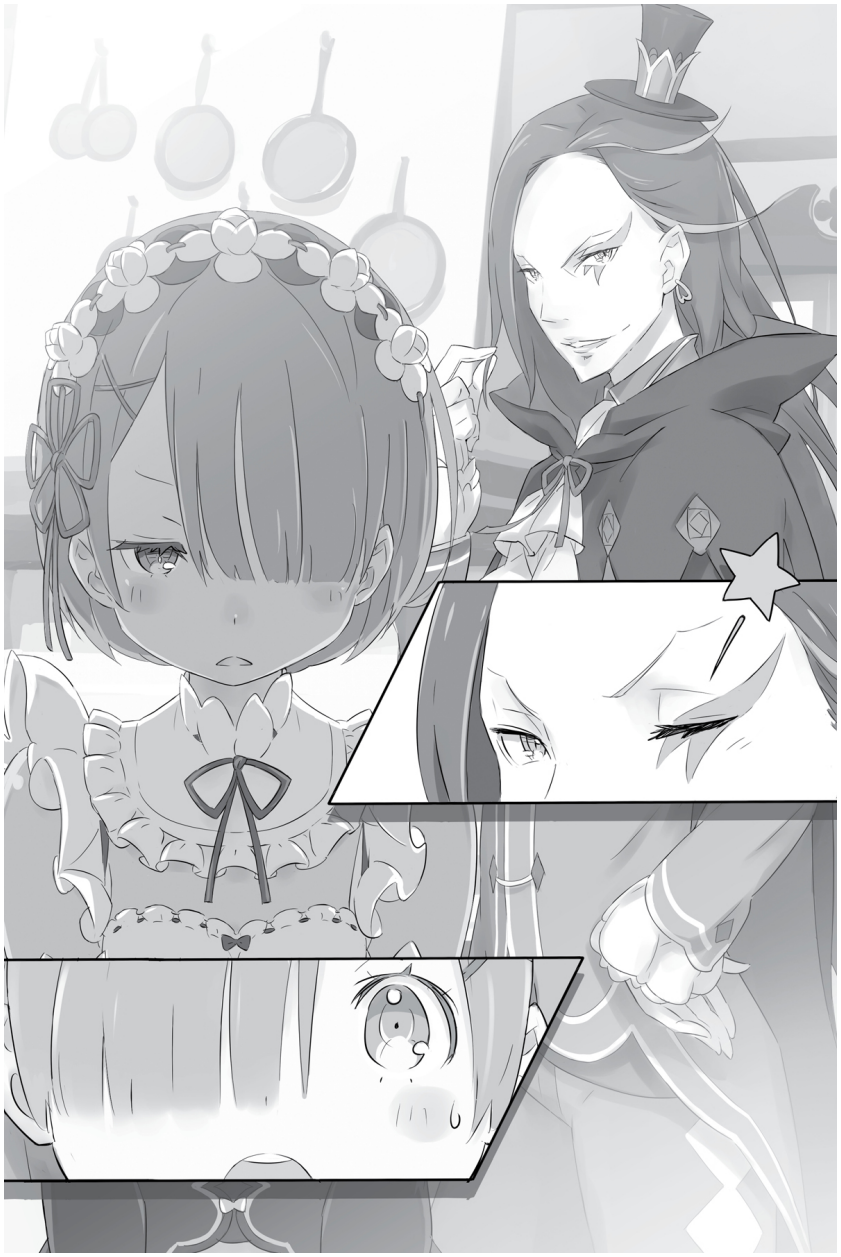
Laundry was collected in the morning and packed away by the great bath. Since getting wet was not a problem and the water was ample there, the fountain at the bath was the typical place to do laundry in the mansion.

Going by that logic, that was where Rem expected to find the pair…

“I just realized, I’m not sure they know how to handle delicate fabrics…”

Panic filled Rem as she found something new to worry about.

Handkerchiefs were one thing, but maid uniforms, Roswaal’s elaborate costumes, most of Emilia’s clothes, and delicate ladies’ undergarments were not things that could be washed with regular laundry. The risk of color bleeding or simply damaging the fabric was especially high.



“How could I be so careless? Sister or I always take care of the laundry…!”

Rem admonished herself for the oversight and rushed to the great bath in the west wing. As she ran, the sound of water and talking voices reached her ears, letting her know the pair was already there. She would just have to get there and take the clothes away from them before they mishandled them and—

“Listen, Betty, this is important. Ladies’ underthings can’t be washed roughly. Their colors will fade, and they can lose their shape, too. You can ruin them in a single wash, so you always have to handle them very carefully. It’s tempting to just chuck all the clothing people won’t see into the wash with everything else, but you’ve got to treat them special because they are special.”

“I see, okay. That’s my Puckie—so knowledgeable. I’m learning so much.”

As Rem quietly caught her breath in the changing room, she watched Beatrice dip her hands into a bucket of water to carefully wash a pair of underwear. Puck floated nearby, swishing his long tail as he gazed down at a small bathtub.

There was something strange about the way he was moving. Rem stood on tiptoe to see what Puck was doing. When she saw the cause, she quietly gasped. In the tub, there was a pile of clothes spinning around in the water with bubbles. It was probably wind and water magic. By reversing the spin of the whirlpool now and again, Puck was able to do a huge load of laundry at once.

And upon closer glance, Beatrice wasn’t touching the water directly with her hands, either. She was using her fingertips to mold the water into a shape—that was how she was washing the undergarments.

It was an overwhelmingly mundane and almost excessive display of magic that could only be performed by powerful beings like them. Even though what they were doing was incredibly high-level, it was perfectly suited for the pedestrian task of laundry. What surprised Rem even more was how oddly knowledgeable Puck was about daily life in human society.

“Once you finish washing the clothes with soapy water, you rinse it in warm water. You have to rinse it properly. Otherwise, white fabrics can turn yellow. When it’s time to dry the clothes,

hang them in a place with a breeze, but not in direct sunlight. This will protect the all-important underwear."

If anything, it was almost creepy how much Puck knew. Had he learned it for Emilia's sake? Where had he learned it? It was an utter mystery.

"At least I don't need to worry about them anymore."

The biggest source of Rem's fear—a lack of knowledge—had turned out to be completely unfounded. Rem sighed in relief and decided this pair would be all right, though she was coming away with several new questions.

"Still, laundry is such a bother. I wonder if humans find it frustrating that they have to do so much to take care of their things that get dirty simply by existing?"

"Yes, all we need to do is go away and come back again to refresh our appearances. Ah, right, your circumstances are a bit different, Betty."

"Just a *bit* different… I don't get dirty the same way you don't, I suppose." Beatrice's tone dropped a little as she looked into her bucket of underwear and said, "It's a pain doing laundry with magic as it is… Washing each and every item by hand is pure insanity. Just doing this for a short while has left me feeling dreadfully bored."

"But those kids do tasks like this every day. We don't need our clothes laundered, but we do need to eat and have a clean space to live in. And they take care of those tasks every day as well, so they're bound to get tired. Now I can see why Subaru wanted to give Rem a day off."

"W-well…I suppose I do see your point. Just a little."

Compared with the constantly sarcastic and emotionally enigmatic Puck, Beatrice was easy to read. Even though Rem was already leaving the changing room, she knew how red Beatrice's cheeks probably were at that very moment.

As Rem walked out of the changing room, she turned to face the bath, bowed, and said, "Thank you both for your kindness."

Then she went to see the final pair working on her behalf that day. These two worried Rem the most, and in a way, she was the most worried that she wouldn't be able to keep quiet or stay hidden around them.

Subaru and Emilia were in the west wing that day, dusting.

"Nothing puts me more in a cleaning mood than tying a

handkerchief around my head," Emilia remarked.

"Now that's something you don't see people do nowadays…"

As she climbed the stairs to the third floor of the west wing, Rem quieted herself when she heard the two talking. She pressed her back against the wall and peered down the hallway. There, she saw Subaru and Emilia wiping windows.

Emilia's hair was tied back, and she had a white kerchief wrapped around her head. The way Subaru stole coy glances at her made Rem giggle.

"But you know, it's not that dirty up here. Looks like somebody does a good job keeping it tidy."

"Well, we do clean the three wings on a rotation. Plus, the west wing is used way less than the other wings. Like the dance hall. That poor room is long overdue for some company."

Emilia breathed on the windows, then wiped them squeaky-clean with her cloth. Subaru was on a stepladder beside her, checking the tops of the windows and doors. He gave an apathetic shrug and said, "Argh, no luck. This spot is clean, too! Wow, look at me, lamenting how *clean* it is. Never thought I'd see the day!"

"It really is surprising. But that's just proof of Rem's hard work. I'm not sure I would have noticed this if I hadn't gone around and looked at everything in detail." Emilia giggled a little as she watched Subaru clutch his head in surrender. She glanced down the hallway and heaved a small sigh. "We really shouldn't make light of all this. Here I was, trying to help Rem, and I wound up learning a valuable lesson. Thanks, Subaru."

"Huh? Oh, um, yeah, that's kind of exactly what I was going for. I wanted you to understand how hard Rem works and give Rem the day off. Two birds, one stone, y'know?"

"Sorry, I don't think I understood that."

Sometimes, when Subaru got self-conscious and started talking really fast, Rem couldn't understand what he was saying, and Emilia seemed to have similar issues. Subaru's shoulders slumped in dejection.

"But cleaning the house like this… It brings back some memories."

"When do you mean, exactly?"

"There was a time when I worked like Ram and Rem. Just for a little while, mind you. A string of misunderstandings brought me there… But now it's a fun memory, hee-hee."

“Huh, I didn’t know that. Wait, don’t tell me you wore a maid’s uniform? Ha-ha, yeah, right.”

“I did wear one. It wasn’t short like Rem’s, though.”

“Wait, really?! Why wasn’t I there to see that?!”

“Huh? Maybe because I hadn’t met you yet?”

As Subaru bit his lip in absolute despair, Emilia gave him a quizzical look. Subaru’s feelings were painfully obvious, and it was criminal that Emilia didn’t notice. A part of Rem felt sorry for Subaru, but another part of her was relieved that the two were making little progress.

“Huh? Wait a minute, isn’t today…? One, two, three…”

While Rem was coming to terms with her feelings, Subaru suddenly started counting something on his fingers. Once he reached a certain number, he quietly muttered, “Oh crap,” as he looked out the window.

“Subaru? Is something wrong?”

“I forgot a really important job we have to do. If we ditch that job, there’ll be a big problem.”

“A really important job… Is it a job that has to be done at a certain time or needs a certain number of people?”

“No, one person can do it just fine. Thing is…it’s the type of job you absolutely can’t forget to do.”

Subaru scratched his cheek as he rued his carelessness. Emilia put a finger to her lips in thought…then once she figured out what Subaru meant, she nodded. “Okay. In that case, you should go do that job, Subaru. I’m sure I can handle cleaning this wing by myself. It’s mostly done already.”

“Emilia-tan…are you sure you’ll be okay without me? Won’t you get lonely?”

“Not even a little bit. Don’t worry.”

“Why do you have to sound so sure of that?”

After a round of the usual banter, Subaru reluctantly left Emilia’s side. She waved quietly at him until he was gone, then with a little “Okay!” to energize herself, she said, “Well, with all that boasting I did in front of Subaru, I’d better deliver. I need to show him I can take care of this easy-peasy on my own… Otherwise, he’ll laugh at me later.”

Even though Subaru would never laugh at Emilia, she seemed to be serious about what she said and brought her bucket and rag into another room. It looked like she would have no problems

cleaning the rest of the wing by herself. If there was one thing Rem *was* worried about…

"Where did Subaru go off to…?"

What was this important job besides meals, laundry, and dusting?

"Oh."

When she recalled how Subaru was staring out the window earlier, Rem finally stumbled upon the answer.

5

"Is it all right if I join you, Subaru?"

When Subaru slipped through the mansion's front gate and saw Rem standing there, his eyes widened in surprise. He scratched his cheek awkwardly as he replied, "Well, dang. So you saw right through me."

"No, I discovered it had slipped my mind until just recently. I likely remembered it the same time you did, Subaru."

With a little smile, Rem reassuringly shook her head at Subaru, who was apologetic. The truth was that if Subaru hadn't remembered it, Rem most likely would have. That was simply how large it loomed in her mind, even on a surprise day off.

"This is the third day since the last time we checked… It's the day we must go to the mountain barrier to see if it is still intact. It would be a shame if it wasn't, since we only just recently contained the demon beasts."

The task Rem had forgotten that Subaru remembered was checking on the barrier. The cause of the demon beast scare a few days prior was a neglected barrier in the mountains that kept the demon beast population away from the village. Because of this, a new barrier had been erected, and it needed to be maintained regularly until it was firmly established. And today happened to be one of those days. Rem had intercepted Subaru just as he was about to go to the mountain.

"All I have to do is check to see if the crystal is still glowing. I can easily do that by myself. Does the idea of me walking in the mountains alone really worry you that much?"

"I always worry about you, Subaru, but that isn't the only reason. I just want to go with you… Is that not okay?"

Subaru evaded Rem's eyes and scratched the tip of his nose.

Rem kept her gaze on him until he heaved a resigned sigh and answered, “Hiking on your day off… You sure are an outdoorsy person, aren’t you, Rem?”

“Whenever I’m with you, it’s okay for me to lean against you as much as I wish. You told me that, remember?”

“And I’m easily manipulated by that offer… All right, you can come with me. No road is long with good company, as they say.”

“Agreed.”

And with that, Subaru began to walk, while Rem followed slightly behind him at his side. That proximity and speed was the most comforting feeling of closeness for Rem. They weren’t side by side, yet she wasn’t totally behind him, either. But sometimes, Subaru would look over his shoulder to check on her, like he was making sure Rem was still following him.

And when Rem realized just how comforting that gesture of his was, that spot right behind Subaru had become her favorite place to be. She felt best when she was there. The black-haired boy’s eyes were so gentle, she could almost feel his warm, considerate touch.

“Listen, Rem—I kinda steamrolled you today and forced you to do a bunch of things… Did that bother you?”

“Why…do you ask?”

“I noticed it again when you were waiting for me at the gate earlier, but I’m worried you weren’t exactly able to relax today. I know, it’s a bit too late, and I should’ve noticed it sooner, but still.”

As Subaru awkwardly tried to gauge Rem’s psychological state, she couldn’t help but giggle softly. He was right; it was too late to worry about it now, and it wasn’t even something he should ask her out of worry, either. But the desire to tease him a little about it welled up in Rem.

“Yes, I suppose so. Truth be told, I would have liked to arrange and assign the work tasks myself, so in that regard, you did give me quite a bit to worry about.”

“*Urgh*… Sorry about that.”

“I had quite a few plans of my own today. And since I took the day off, that might impact my workload tomorrow. I can’t deny that your plan has put me in a bit of a pickle.”

“*Gurg*… One small kindness can turn into one big bother for others…”

With a sideways glance at Subaru, who was clutching his chest and wobbling as he walked, Rem sneakily stuck out her tongue and

grinned. He had given her a scare, so this little revenge was warranted. Though while he had given her a scare, gaining a day off was not at all a bad feeling.

"But I was very happy how kind and considerate you've been to me today, and during this day off, I got to see how Lady Emilia, Master Roswaal, and everyone else thinks of me. And for that, I want to thank you."

There was also Puck's unusual well of trivia and Beatrice's stouthearted use of magic. The way she spun the laundry to wash it was something Rem wanted to adopt.

Subaru stopped in his tracks, his jaw dropped. Then his lips twisted into a smile when he realized Rem had played him. "Geez, Rem, I'm happy we've grown close enough that you're able to joke at my expense."

"I'm sorry. But I was telling the truth when I said the suddenness of it all gave me a scare. And in a way, seeing that the house could be run perfectly fine without me made me feel a little sad."

"Er, yeah, but we can't always focus all our combat powers on household tasks like we did today. Besides, if we take your early-morning errands into account, I doubt we would successfully manage an entire day's worth of chores."

"I do believe that's an exaggeration."

"Says the girl who does the work of five people all by herself. I think it's high time you revised your opinion of yourself, Rem. Nobody would bat an eye if you sang your own praises now and again."

As she received Subaru's praise, Rem felt nothing but pure bliss. Hearing him say that made all those days of hard work worth it. She had nothing but gratitude for Subaru, for instigating the experiment, and the desire to reward him for his thoughtfulness consumed her.

"Subaru?"

"Hmm? What's up? Ready to sing your own praises now?"

"Thank you for everything."

"Why're you thanking *me*?! When did I do something to deserve it?!" Subaru sputtered, flustered by the unexpected answer.

Rem giggled into her hand.

It was the generous boy's lack of self-awareness that made her love him so much.

6

The next morning, Rem woke up earlier than usual, took extra care with her personal grooming, accomplished the early-morning chores with more cheer than usual, and arrived at Ram's room at the same time as usual.

"Sister, Sister, it's morning. And a very lovely morning at that."

"Nnn…five more minutes," Ram said with a groan like she did every morning.

As she burrowed into her blanket, Rem pulled her up to her feet. Ram wobbled as Rem sat behind her and ran a brush through her pink hair.

"Sister, here's a hot towel."

Yawning, Ram took the hot towel from her sister. As she wiped her face, her senses gradually awakened. Meanwhile, Rem brought out her clothes, slipped off Ram's nightgown, and helped her into her uniform. She was a pro at the job.

Rem hummed as she dressed her sister, who was fully awake now and broke into a smile.

"Rem…you seem to be in very high spirits this morning."

"Am I? Well…yes, I suppose I would be. I had a very meaningful day off yesterday. And I owe it in part to all your hard work, Sister."

"So…did you have a good rest?" Ram asked simply.

Rem thought over the last day—the lunch and dinner Ram and Roswaal had prepared, the way Beatrice sunbathed with her belly exposed as she dried the laundry, the way Puck flew in a sudden gust of wind, the way Emilia broke a pot mid-dusting and wandered around in circles on the verge of tears…and of course, the words she and Subaru exchanged on their little walk in the mountains…

Each and every memory made the answer quite obvious to Rem. "Yes, Sister. I had the happiest day off yesterday."

"Good. That's all I needed to hear."

Ram closed her eyes and nodded in satisfaction after she saw Rem's smile. This was an expression of heartfelt contentedness that not even Rem got to see very often. Ram let her peaceful gaze go to the window and said, "I suppose Barusu does have useful ideas now and again."

"Oh yes! Subaru is amazing. You feel that way, too, don't you, Sister?"

“I was *about* to feel that way, but now I’ve changed my mind.”

Rem puffed her cheeks childishly at her sister’s sarcastic reply. It was a side of herself that she only let her sister see. (Though, that list had expanded to include one other person now.)

After Ram was dressed, Rem clapped for her as she posed in front of the mirror. Then they stepped out into the hall just in time to see Subaru, yawning and walking through it. Spotting the twins, he stifled his yawn and waved. “Good morning, you two… Wait, why is the elder of you glaring at me first thing in the morning?”

“Like you don’t know? This is the face a lady makes when she finds a dead rat first thing in the morning.”

“Um, I hope that wasn’t a direct response to my question!”

Weighed down by the conversation in her room, Ram was extra icy with Subaru that morning. With a sheepish smile, Rem decided secretly that she would be extra nice to Subaru to compensate.

“Don’t mind her, Subaru. She’s just being honest with her feelings.”

“That’s a funny way of saying, *I’m sorry my sister called you a dead rat*!”

Rem wasn’t sure why, but she had failed. Sometimes, her attempts at kindness would miss, and that always confused Rem. Still, Subaru set aside his frustrations and took a deep breath. Then he looked at Rem and said, “By the way, Rem, did you manage to get some rest and enjoy your surprise day off yesterday?”

“Yes, of course. And I owe it all to you, Subaru.”

“Tsk!”

“Sister, you just cursed under your breath, didn’t you?” Subaru stared hard at Ram, who looked away in a huff. Though envious of their good rapport, Rem took satisfaction in the fact that she had found a joy even greater than that.

“Well, I’m glad to see that big smile on your face, Rem,” Subaru said, shyly scratching his cheek as he observed the unexpectedly big smile on the maid’s face. “So, Rem—you had a whole day to think about it. Have you chosen a reward yet? And don’t tell me you were too busy concentrating on relaxing to think of one.”

“Oh, I won’t tell you that. But you don’t need to give me a reward, because I already got it.”

“Whoa, for real? That’s news to me. Stupid Rozchi, I thought

we were friends.” Cocking his head to the side, Subaru griped about the absent master of the house. But it was a simple misunderstanding. And a blatant false charge toward Roswaal.

Because Rem had already gotten her reward in full from Subaru’s suggestion. Everyone in the house had been mindful of Rem and had helped freely so that Rem could get the most out of her day off.

Everyone believed she was worthy of that. And she now believed she was worthy of it, too—what greater reward was there than that?

“___Your Rem is looking forward to putting in another day’s hard work!”

And that was why Rem’s smile was much sweeter that day as she looked at her two loved ones.

<Fin>

THE DAY I STOPPED BEING THE ALDEBARAN STAR

1

On the world's single continent, there were four nations considered great powers. Each of these nations occupied a cardinal direction, and the other smaller nations were considered vassal states that fell under their protection.

Peace between the four great nations was held together in a delicate balance. Excluding the rising nation of Kararagi, this stalemate had not changed much in the past thousand years.

The Holy Kingdom of Gusteko in the north, burdened both with bitter cold and steep mountain ranges, was a harsh land to inhabit for humans and animals alike. The accumulated snowfall over many years made the land unfarmable, save only for the few crops that were resilient to cold. Instead, they raised livestock, and the craggy mountains were filled with plentiful magic stone veins. As such, the nation cemented its position by excavating and using magic stone.

The peak of Sacred Mountain Pardochia was where the mighty Odgras, one of the Four Great Spirits, resided. At the founding of Gusteko, Odgras made a covenant with his spirit mage, who assumed the title of *Holy King*. Odgras continued to play a role in elections for the Holy King into the modern day.

As the ruler of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, the Holy King was chosen not by bloodline or birthplace. Instead, Odgras selected someone from the nation whom he deemed worthy.

The city-state of Kararagi in the west was a younger nation with a shorter history compared with the other three. Until only four hundred years prior, the western part of the continent consisted of several small warring states vying for land. As none of these small states was especially mightier than the others, they each feared destruction under a coordinated attack and spent many long, tense years without any progress.

It was a merchant by the name of Hoshin who finally put an

end to this stalemate. Of dubious birth and origin, Hoshin rose to power using only his words, his business savvy, and his ideas, until he was finally able to wield formidable magic against the warring nations—a magic called *economic power*.

Hoshin did not belong to any of the smaller nations, yet he had a hand in every nation's market. As a result, most of the small nations bowed down to him, reclassifying themselves as city-states, all of which had Hoshin as their representative—this was how the nation of Kararagi was born.

Ever since, the name Hoshin had become synonymous with success. Even long after Hoshin's passing, Kararagi was a place where many gifted people gathered, hoping to follow in his footsteps. And that was how the many city-states of Kararagi transformed into a nation that could match the other three great powers.

The southern Empire of Volakia had a much older history. With the long-held mantra of *Enrich the country, strengthen the army*, it was ruled by an emperor. This emperor held absolute power and handled all government matters unilaterally.

This system had not changed since Volakia's founding, and the only reason the empire never went bankrupt under a foolish emperor was due to a grand law regarding the emperor's succession of power.

During an emperor's reign, he was obligated to produce children in all areas of the empire. These children then fought to determine who would inherit the throne. Losing this emperor-selection process meant death. These political wars to select the next emperor were a gruesome distillation of this world's hatred and ugliness.

This nationalism trickled down to the empire's citizens. The principles *supremacy of the powerful* and *supremacy of a powerful empire* were spread far and wide as inherent truth.

Volakia did have diplomatic relations with the other nations, but since their fertile lands and stable climate allowed them to be entirely self-sufficient as a nation, they were not particularly interested in trade. Instead, they had a savage hunger for expansion—a constant issue for neighboring Lugunica, which had to constantly keep them in check.

Because of this, a particular sense of impending danger loomed

over Bariel's baronry in the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica's southwestern region.

2

"Word has it, the baron has a new wife."

To Bariel's citizens, this wasn't particularly interesting news, worthy of only a snide remark here and there between farm laborers.

The citizens of the Bariel baronry didn't think too highly of Baron Lyp Bariel, the man who managed their lands. If anything, they thought poorly of him. His laws and taxes gave little consideration to his people. Not only did he show no kindness to them—but he also rarely showed his face. To command his people to like him would be a tall order indeed.

With such animosity between a lord and his people, seeds of rebellion were inevitable. Revolts had been plotted many times during the past decade.

However, while this lord cared little for the prosperity of his people, he was abnormally shrewd when it came to their conspiracies. Ultimately, every rebellion had been quashed with incredible brutality, only worsening relations between lord and people with each passing day.

Because of this, news of their lord's marriage—what should have been a blessed occasion—was trivial news to the common people. A landlord approaching old age taking a young wife several years his junior didn't even fall into the range of minor curiosity. After all, they had little doubt this new wife would be no better—she would undoubtedly hoard the fruits of *their* labor so that she could live in the lap of luxury.

Someday, Lyp's life might come to an end, bringing the heirless Bariel house to ruin. That was the only ray of hope that had kept the citizens living another day. This was their first assessment of her—their assessment *before* they met Priscilla Bariel, the red woman.

"Ha! What a tasteless and spineless lineup," she spat as she observed the village's number one farm and its caretaker. The contempt in her voice and the words she said with great disdain caused many heads to look up. They sensed a barely restrained rage in her, but the moment they saw her, they lost the ability to speak.

Standing before them was the red woman.

Her hair, orange as the flaming sun, was tied back with a barrette, and her ample curves were highlighted by her deep-red dress. Her lips, painted lightly in red, were chiseled in a smirk, and her eyes burned with abundant red flame as she returned the gazes of the people staring at her.

Even the fan she used to cool herself was red—she was crimson from head to toe. The effect was so visually striking that even though the people knew at a glance that she was of higher status than them, each and every one of them forgot how to speak in her presence.

The red woman was so enchanting that it completely eclipsed her outrageous outfit. Everyone in her presence, regardless of gender, trembled at her unfathomable beauty.

“Remove those impure gazes from me at once. What daring yet lowly and foolish peasants.”

However, her bearing and her jeers ruined any positive impression they had. Noticing her contempt after the fact, her subjects shoved the rage that burned in their eyes deep into the bottoms of their souls as they stared at the ground.

The red woman’s words were humiliating. But at a glance, they could tell her status was well above theirs. In other words, no good would come of standing up to her. It was best to handle her the way they handled everyone in power—bow down, hide their discontent, and wait for the storm to pass.

“Aha, now I see. The long years of resignation stole every spark of rebellion out of your spines and instilled a defeatist mentality into you. Guess that old geezer really is a worthy nobleman after all. He clearly knows how to discipline.”

As the woman looked over the peasants in understanding, the head worker of the field spoke up in a resolute tone. “W-we recognize you as a noblewoman, my lady. What brings you to our humble village today…?”

As the owner of the best field in the village, he was technically their representative, though it wasn’t much of a contest. He was the only one who had any justification asking a noble what business they had here.

“Slow down, pleb. I suppose a sudden visit from a striking beauty such as I would surprise you, but I shall conduct my own business on my terms without any pressure to hurry from anybody.

You should count your blessings and forget the passage of time as you catch glimpses of my beauty out of the corner of your eye."

The red woman leaned in close to the field owner, close enough to breathe on him as she spoke alluringly into his face. He shrank back, noticeably flustered. And who could blame him?

The field owner was old enough to be the red woman's father, but her sheer allure and magnetism dissolved the years between them, evoking the man's primal awareness of her womanhood. *Enchantress*—that was the word best suited for her.

"Ahaaa…quite illuminating."

After making the field owner wither, the woman walked around the fields as if she owned them. Meanwhile, the people were preoccupied stealing glances at her—just as she had told them to do. If they resumed their field labor, nobody would have a right to complain to them, but nobody showed any inclination of doing so.

Everyone feared standing out from the crowd and drawing the attention of that red woman.

"Now I see. I'll take this one and this one…and those two over there. They aren't much different anyway. Consider yourself lucky to have fallen into my good graces."

After a walk around the fields, the woman gave a nod of approval. Then she stared the field owner up and down, giggling seductively when she noticed him shivering. Her smile, suggestively evil as it was, also held such beauty that nobody could dare look away.

"You, pleb—you own the biggest fields in this baronry, yes?"

"Y-yes, my lady."

"I can tell by the sight of them. Though they are meager, they are large. Your ambitions are ill-suited to the quality of the fruit from those rotten old trees—much like a certain baron I could mention."

Her words, dripping with contempt and ridicule, were about none other than Lyp. The people noticed the audacity of her statement a moment after the fact, their faces paling in shock.

They considered their dominion lord a celestial being. They were so used to this perspective that their minds could not comprehend the concept of a being higher than him. However, that was a groundless suspicion.

"Anyway, your fields are well managed. It makes a good stepping stone for comparison. There is another who has received

the blessings my power bestows. On the other side of the road—the owner of those four meager fields."

The woman pointed to what was a wasteland in comparison with the tracts the biggest field owner tended. The owner of those fields had wasted away, just like the land itself. He and his family survived day by day only by the kind support of his fellow villagers.

When the red woman saw that villager, her eyes filled with dreadful emotions. It was mostly contempt, malice, and vicious superiority.

"Well, no matter. A little water on those withered stalks, and everyone will notice the change it brings."

Shrugging off the stupefied expression on the villagers' faces, the woman looked away in boredom. Then she pointed at the withered field and politely told the man something. Only the man could hear what she whispered in his ear; nobody else knew what sort of unreasonable demands she was making. But anybody who saw how dumbly he nodded like a puppet felt sorry for the man.

After she finished whispering her message, the woman crossed her arms in satisfaction. Her ample bosom gave a large jiggle above her arms, and the female villagers stared daggers at the men who ogled in spite of themselves.

"Oh, I forgot to mention this, but my name is Priscilla Bariel. I am the new head of the House of Bariel, lord of these lands. Relay the message to everyone who wasn't here today. I shall graciously overlook the insolence I observed today, but only on the grounds that you are all ignorant and unenlightened."

With that, she delivered crushing parting words to the peasants, who had finally regained their senses. It was only after the fact that they realized Priscilla was Lyp Bariel's new wife. They did not understand why she had visited their fields without bringing him with her, but her arrogant recklessness certainly reminded them of Lyp.

And the fact that she was a young lady meant any hopes of her dying of old age and liberating them were dashed. For many long years thereafter, they would suffer under her laws, equally tyrannical as Lyp's.

Priscilla's arrival instilled fear and unease in everyone—which was completely forgotten one month later.

And that was because the man's fields that Priscilla had singled

out would later be blessed with unbelievable abundance.

3

"Y'know, I was really surprised, to be honest. Didn't realize just how adored you were, Princess."

The voice was unceremonious and carefree, yet muffled and difficult to hear—the reason being a metallic clinking that accompanied it. The speaker wore a jet-black helmet and had a habit of tinkering with the mouth opening while he spoke.

The man was dressed oddly—or bizarrely, rather.

A black helmet covered his entire head, as mentioned previously, but he was only heavily armored from the neck up. His muscled body was dressed roughly like a mountain bandit's, and his feet were clothed in leather sandals. He wore a rugged cloth draped around his shoulders, and from his belt, a blunt, rustic sword peeked out.

In a way, he seemed to be dressed for some kind of fetish, but from within the strange appearance, there was one point that stood out.

The man in the black helmet was missing his left arm.

Between his strange clothing and obviously missing appendage, the man commanded a unique presence simply by standing there. This was all the more so when he stood beside the red woman—Priscilla Bariel.

"What do you mean by '*surprised*,' Al? Behold my beauty—it surpasses human knowledge. Just as the baby chicks scramble for their worms, it is only natural that these plebs and fools worship my divinity."

"Yeah, random assumption on my part, I guess. I just thought you were a hands-off-and-let-the-fish-propagate-themselves type of gal."

"If I were, why would I give you such a warm reception?"

"Now that you mention it, yeah. My mistake, I guess."

Accepting Priscilla's retort without complaint, the man in the helmet—Al—scratched his head with his beefy right hand through his helmet. He gave his surroundings an interested once-over, but his emotion and facial expression were not to be seen.

However, Priscilla had no reaction to his attitude. She strutted on her way without hesitation, the villagers nearby raising their

voices as they noticed her.

“Oh! It’s Princess Priscilla!” “Our Princess!” “All hail the Sun Princess!”

It only took one person to notice her and cry out to bring everyone running out of their houses. The villagers, their faces filled with bright smiles, took their turns singing Priscilla’s praises.

“Mm. Quite good. You may praise me as much as you like, foolish plebs. As long as you bow before my glory, you shall receive my mercy. I am not so heartless. Keep up the effort and never falter.”

Priscilla spoke not to anyone in particular, but to everyone who was crying out to her in praise. Though she did not talk loudly, her voice had the power to carry everywhere. Al was a bit taken aback by the arrogance of what she was saying—

“Understood, my lady!” “Anything for you, Princess!” “All hail the Sun Princess!”

Not only were the villagers not offended, but her arrogant performance also actually seemed to be received quite well. The disconnect between his mistress’s impression and the way the peasants responded to it made Al cock his head in constant confusion.

Al had been appointed Priscilla’s knight only a few days prior. Needing to choose a knight for herself, Priscilla held a dueling contest, prioritizing her goals and her own personal taste in the selection process.

A large crowd of hopefuls threw their names into the ring when they heard the baroness needed a personal knight and that pedigree did not matter. The exhibition was a huge success. And Al was the one who caught Priscilla’s eye that day and won the position of her personal knight.

As master and servant, they hadn’t spent much time together yet. While he was permitted to be in her presence, Al watched over her every minute detail, but there was something about her that remained invisible to him.

She seemed deep in thought one moment, then she would suddenly carry out an idea the next. She would seem friendly and kind with her subjects one moment, then she would suddenly show a flash of cruelty in her eyes, cold enough to freeze a man’s spine. And her body, which appeared to be stuffed full with nothing but sultry femininity, seemed to contain a swelling ferocity that

suggested she could catch Al off guard, steal his sword, and lop his head off.

And the result, even after spending days with his new mistress: Al still couldn't get a read on her.

"Come, come, Al, don't just stand there. The plebs are all brimming with curiosity about you. They wonder, what is this strange cryptid of a man standing beside our beautiful princess?"

"Well, wouldn't it be faster if ya just told them yourself, Princess?"

"Mind the way you speak to me, Al. Even I am not certain how many more times I can laugh off the nonsensical things you say. Don't earn a person's disfavor over trivial matters."

Just when he thought he had her figured out, she would say things like that. She had been in a good mood only a moment ago, but in a few short seconds, she looked at him like she was scrutinizing a piece of trash.

"Yeah, sorry, I misspoke. It was like, what kind of servant orders his mistress to introduce him? Sorry, my bad, *forgive me chonmage*."

"Very well, I shall forgive you. However, you must tell me later what *chonmage* is."

His one-liner was an unexpected success. Al heaved a sigh of relief after escaping Priscilla's wrath. Then he proceeded to explain who he was to the peasants—exaggerating, approximating, and humorizing the story of how he came to be under Priscilla's employ.

4

"Princess Priscilla is a wonderful woman. She is much like a goddess to me."

As the boy timidly poured tea with shaking hands, he gave his answer to Al's question. Though his manner of speech was odd, it was still charming in a way.

They were in the lounge of Bariel Manor. Unceremoniously spreading his butt cheeks on the finely upholstered sofa, Al was thoroughly enjoying his break.

"Well, Schult, considering how much you love the Princess, I figured that's what you'd say."

With a smirk at the boy, Al lifted the teacup he was handed. Then he softly looked up and skillfully poured the tea down the gap

between his head and neck.

Al's most consistent trait was that he always left his helmet on and never showed his face. Since he only had one arm, his meals were never elegant. He just had one hand to lift his helmet and feed himself—and since he couldn't do both at the same time, by necessity, he took all his meals the same way he drank his tea now.

"My table manners…do they bother ya?"

Noticing Schult's intense stare, Al set down his cup and asked him a question in a low voice. Schult quietly gasped in reply.

He was slight of frame, with fair skin and curly pink hair, and his crimson eyes were insecure—in every metric, he was so frail and dainty that he could easily be mistaken for a girl. He was twelve or thirteen years old, but his body did not have the level of development that went with his age, and he looked not a day older than ten.

And this boy, who could easily be called a little boy, was wearing the black uniform of a servant and carrying out a butler's tasks. Some might smile fondly at the sight of him, and others might feel secondhand embarrassment for him. And the fact was, as Al watched the boy perform grown-up tasks ill-suited to his stature, he felt pity for him.

"I ain't got any schooling. So turn a blind eye to my bad manners, okay? You can tell, can't you?"

Al roughly crossed his legs on a chair, acting even less refined than before. Watching this, Schult adamantly shook his head and said, "Like you, Sir Al, I am myself uneducated. I am not grand enough to be griping about the way you carry yourself."

"Honesty is a virtue and a special privilege of children, as they say. I thought I looked the part by now, but I've gotta do somethin' about what's inside, too. So, Schult, you're technically my senior. How long've you been working here?"

"About three long months have passed now since Princess Priscilla rescued me."

Schult didn't flinch at the sarcastic way Al called him his senior. And it would be cruel to ask him why, as he was a fresh orphan from a poor farming village.

Priscilla had taken the young butler home with her after visiting a farming village on her land. She decided to keep the scrawny Schult on the grounds that he would shine if polished. Lyp had been very cross with her, but Priscilla didn't seem to care.

And so Schult got to stay, having won Priscilla's favor. He received the three necessities of food, clothing, and shelter under Priscilla's care as her butler.

"I'm not sure if winning the princess's favor was a blessing or a curse," Al remarked.

"Oh, I am truly grateful that Princess Priscilla rescued me. If I had stayed in that village, I would most certainly be in the embrace of the earth by now."

"Ooh, blind faith. How cute. Meanwhile, I'm over here like, racking my brain trying to figure out what's on her mind and what kind of person she really is."

She seemed like she would never do philanthropic work one minute, then she rescued an orphan the next. Having said that, her hand of mercy did not extend to everyone, and it always came with conditions.

Was Priscilla really a goddess who believed in her people and in Schult? Or was she really a witch who made Al's spine freeze at times…?

"A witch. Definitely a witch…"

As soon as he said the word out loud, the banality of his own voice made him laugh. In this world, the word *witch* was taboo. Al knew better than anybody else how dangerous the implication of that word really was.

"Sir Al…"

"Hmm?"

Schult's worried voice snapped Al out of his thoughts. The way he hugged the silver serving platter to his chest was so feminine, it was almost perverse.

"Princess Priscilla chose you as her knight…didn't she? So…you will protect her. And you are her ally… It's okay for me to trust you, right?"

Schult's eyes latched onto him, desperately searching for an answer. Behind his helmet, Al closed his eyes. The boy was hoping Al would say something bold and confident to dispel all his fears.

"Well, from the way you worded that question, I guess I have to answer: *Don't worry, son, I'll take care of everything. I am the princess's most powerful knight ever!* That really wasn't an appropriate question. It's like, try again later, pal."

Al saw the hurt in Schult's eyes when he answered. But it didn't affect Al's conscience at all. Al felt no hesitation in betraying the

look of pure innocence the boy directed at him. He would cut down anything that stood between him and his goals. To an extent, the obvious solution was necessary in achieving his dearest wish.

Making the same mistake as before was the one thing he absolutely would not tolerate.

"Oh—I wondered where you'd run off to, and here I find you in the midst of a gloomy tea party."

The silence in the lounge was broken by the beautiful and condescending voice of a young woman. The mistress of the house shoved the door open without knocking, the hem of her ornate dress rustling as she pushed her way through the room. Resting her ample bosom on the shelf of her folded arms, the woman closed one eye and said, "Schult. A good underling is always at my side when I need him. Failing to do so because you were having *tea* is simply preposterous. Even more so when you're in the company of an eccentric dandy like Al. Your cuteness is your only redeeming quality—we can't have his filth rub off on you."

"By saying that's his only redeeming quality, you've insulted him miles more than me, Princess."

"Well, it's the truth. And when I say it, that truth holds even more power. Schult has no other worth besides his looks right now. Yet that still makes him better than the other worthless plebs. However, if he keeps betraying my expectations, I shall have to rescind my gracious evaluation of him."

Priscilla looked down at the two in the lounge, spitting and snorting as she spoke. Al couldn't help but smirk over her arrogant display, but Schult's face was pale.

"I-I'll be trying harder, Princess! S-so please…please don't abandon me…!"

"Oh, don't cry, it's such an eyesore. Crying in hopes I'll show some mercy is the height of stupidity. No underling of mine shall act like an ordinary pleb. Keep proving your worth to me, boy."

As she roundly criticized his show of fear, Schult quickly wiped his eyes with his sleeve. His eyes were still faintly red and puffy, but Priscilla nodded in approval at the determined way he looked up at her.

"Good little pleb. If you don't have the grit to change your tune, you're no better than a corpse. Now, a corpse could fertilize the soil if buried, but we can't let the dead wander the earth, can we? I won't have you suck up all my air. Take each breath like it's your

last, boy."

"Well that's just heartless…and if Schult breathes that desperately, he'll hyperventilate and die." As Schult began to breathe hard, an intense look in his eyes, Al looked at Priscilla and shrugged. "Princess—he's just a *kid*. It wouldn't hurt to show him a little kindness now and again."

"In this world, uncertainty rains down upon us all, young and old, man and woman alike. Does hunger and famine sort people by size? Does the hand of plague discriminate between the classes? As living beings, we are all equals. As long as you aren't imprisoned in an iron cage, relying on others for your own peace of mind is only delaying the inevitable."

"Princess?"

As Priscilla spat out those harsh words, lines of irritation rose on her beautiful face. Al couldn't shake the feeling that the source of her irritation came from the second half of what he had said. But before he could pinpoint what exactly her irritation was, Priscilla's expression changed.

"All living things are equal—with the exception of *me*, of course."

"Princess…"

She was smiling. With a smile more seductive and crueler than anything in this world, Priscilla spat those words out quietly. It was her mantra, which Al had heard her say many times since he began service as her knight.

"This world bends itself to suit me."

It was the source of her self-confidence—the highest words that put her very existence on a pedestal.

"Now, Schult, as I just said, if all things in this world are made to suit my needs…then if I am thirsty, do you know what would suit my needs?"

"Y-yes, Princess. I'll pour your tea straight away!"

"Nonsense. The contents of that pot are surely cold. And it would be *treason* to suggest I drink the rest of Al's cup. Your head will fly."

"P-please have mercy! I'll brew a new pot right away!"

And Schult flew out of the lounge, hugging the teapot to his chest. As Al listened to his tiny footsteps disappear into the distance, he shrugged at the smirking Priscilla and said, "That's some rotten personality you've got there, Princess."

“A calm butler who goes about his work with ease is nice and all, but his childish fluster is also appealing to me. If I wanted a normal butler, why would I go out of my way to pick an orphan off the street? I think Schult will prove a good antidote to the boredom that plagues me.”

“Poor kid… Winning your interest was a calamity.”

“‘Calamity,’ my foot. He gets to talk with me and serve me in person. The men of this world would cry tears of blood and lash out in starved desperation for such good fortune. Not an orphan in this world is more blessed than he.”

Legitimatizing the way she abused Schult, Priscilla spoke words that were laced with a demand that Al give her gratitude for the same kindness. But Al answered her hungry gaze with a lackluster “Sure, whatever.”

“You disrespectful oaf. It appears you’ve forgotten the time I almost severed your head on a whim. Well…no matter. By the by, Al.”

“What is it, Princess?”

“Your *cunning plan*… Is it well underway?”

Her tone was so icy that Al stopped breathing and looked at Priscilla. The way she had sent Schult away and made sure nobody was around before she changed the subject was a testament to her shrewdness. The sneaky way she had casually dropped a bomb on the conversation was just as shocking as if a real explosion had happened in front of his face.

If he hadn’t run a simulation on this scenario before it actually happened, he would have disgraced himself.

“It’s nothing grand enough to call a cunning plan… I’m still in the information-gathering phase. So you caught me sniffing around in secret?”

“My eyes, ears, and body are not only more beautiful than average—their senses are incredibly keen. What’s more, this is my land and my garden. I can hear the footsteps of the mice or beats of the insects’ wings if I feel so inclined.”

“Careful—if you have too much control over everything here, old man Lyp will cry.”

“That fossil? Let him cry himself dry—I couldn’t care less.”

While it was doubtful they had a loving relationship to begin with, hearing her speak so brutally about her husband was rather sad. But now was no time for Al to concern himself over the future

of their sham marriage.

"What if you don't like guys creeping around you? Are you gonna whip me?"

He knew no punishment from Priscilla would be so lenient, but it would be a problem for her to suspect him of treason. He should not, however, discount the option of using his trump card against Priscilla—

"No. I won't throw a fit over a man merely poking around my house. After all, I imagined such a scenario when I welcomed an insubordinate animal like you into my home."

—but his vigilance was thrown off its target by Priscilla's unexpected answer.

"You really don't care?"

"All men desperately sniff around wherever I've been, hoping to inhale a particle of my scent. How can I find fault in a man for losing his way in the fog of desire? Besides…"

As Al stood there, perplexed, Priscilla shot him a sideways glance that held a chilling allure, then said, "Lowly scum like you with a precarious position in life must choose carefully the riverbank at which you dock your boat. Finding fault in you for running about aimlessly in search of ascertainment would be as foolish as commanding a bird not to fly."

"……"

"It has been a scant few days since I first met you, a mere sword-slave-turned-mercenary. And you think I *believe* your loyalty already rests entirely in me, body and soul? Only an idealistic idiot would. That would require a *severe* abandonment of reason."

As Priscilla snapped her bitter insults at him, the tension in Al's body slowly drained away. At the very least, he knew she meant every word she said. That was enough to make his judgment.

"Huh…I just assumed you'd say, *Comparing myself with others is blasphemy. You all should be grateful to lose yourselves in the glory of my beauty*, or something like that."

"Only if I lacked self-confidence would I fear your gaze wandering elsewhere. I am confident that I am the most supreme being in this entire world. Therefore, I have no need for such fear."

Pulling a fan from her cleavage, Priscilla loudly snapped it open and continued, "I am the most beautiful jewel in the world—I've no doubt of that—but to say I am supreme, I must first acknowledge that there are other jewels to be compared with. To fully

understand my greatness, one must first compare me with the other plebs. Your hesitation to accept me was born out of a need to confirm my greatness. A roundabout way of praising me, no less. Well? Are you impressed by my outrageously clever deduction?"

"Yeah…it's outrageous, all right."

Priscilla hid her lips behind her open fan, but her smile could not be contained. It took Al a moment to give her outspoken arrogance a nod of agreement. But Priscilla did not rebuke his moment's hesitation. Because she deemed doing so to be pointless.

And Al was so shaken up that he didn't notice this. He felt like he had just been sucker punched. The young woman standing before him looked different from before. As for what she looked like now…

"Princess Priscilla! So sorry for the delay! I have brought your tea!"

"Too late!!"

But before Al could come up with an answer, Schult burst through the door into the room. Priscilla's angry roar greeted him as Schult's dangerously trembling hands set out the tea. Priscilla lowered herself into an empty sofa beside him, making a show of crossing her white legs in wait.

And as he watched his invulnerable mistress and the red-faced boy serving her, Al sank even deeper into his thoughts.

5

Al frowned at the smell wafting into his helmet. This was his second time in the library, and the last time he was there, he'd had a similar reaction.

The air was stuffy and ripe with the distinctive odor of old books. Al might have been able to tolerate that combination, if not for the stench of perfume that had been heavily applied in an attempt to mask more offensive smells, and the person responsible, whose stench had seeped into the room beyond repair.

The resulting stink made others hesitant to ever enter the library.

"You're late."

His motivation already sapped by the fumes that greeted him, Al grew even wearier when the brusque voice barked at him. His zero motivation had dipped into the negatives. If this was a person

he could afford to be rude to, he would have already escaped out the door long ago.

But the man before him was not magnanimous enough to laugh off such an action.

"You're late."

He repeated the rebuke without changing a word. Filled with contempt, the gravelly voice was seeking some response from the annoyed Al. Dissatisfied with a simple rebuke, he wouldn't be satisfied until he had broken the man's spirit. He was a very small man.

"You're—"

"Do forgive me, my lord. Your house is so big, it took me a lot of door-opening before I could respond to your sudden summons. Oh—did you say something just now?"

In forcing a third rebuke out of the old man, Al earned an unabashedly ill-humored click of the tongue. Finding relief in that reaction, Al took another good look at the man in the library. The old man was surrounded by bookshelves on either side, and he sat at an ebony desk. Al heard the man was not quite seventy, but his energetic physique suggested a man of fifty. His eyes, brimming with vigor, played a big part in this, and his straight spine and muscled body made him look rather distinguished.

Though, the vulgar and selfishly materialistic personality contrasting with his appearance was lethal.

The old man's name was Baron Lyp Bariel. He was the head of the House of Bariel and the husband of the red woman, Priscilla. Since to Al, he was formally the partner of the woman he pledged his sword to, it could be said that he was a man to whom Al owed his respect.

(Though, Al never considered him someone deserving of that respect.)

"I hear you've been indulging in the carefreeness of *that girl*, wandering about the lands daily."

"And who do you mean by *that girl*, my lord?"

"Damn fool, who else would I mean—? My wife, Priscilla, of course!"

"Yes, of course. I mean, *now* it's clear to me. You see, my mother told me that when a husband no longer calls his wife by her name, that means his affections for her have gone cold."

In his mind, Al laughed at the fuming old man while he gave a

random answer.

"I heard you're a sword slave. Do you even remember your parents?"

"Contrary to popular belief, not all of Volakia's sword slaves are born in the fighting arenas. Most of them became sword slaves as adults because they were in debt or they committed crimes. But if they're the same age, they claw their way to the top by beating one another to a pulp. That's the punch line."

"Humph. Sounds like a scene a savage empire brute would like. I can imagine how awful their tastes are."

To Al's surprise, he found himself agreeing with Lyp's scathing opinion. In all honesty, he did not want to remember his sword slave days. Al wasn't suited to the daily grind of competing for power and glory in constant fights to the death. He had managed to miraculously survive, and now he savored his peaceful days.

"Well, I couldn't care less about you right now," Lyp grumbled. "Now, about Priscilla. *That girl* wanders the lands every day and does as she pleases—what do you think of this?"

"I think she has odd taste. It doesn't exactly seem on-brand… That is, it's not the way I'd *imagine* a dominion lord's wife to behave. Then again, your subjects seemed to really get a kick out of it."

"They *get a kick out of it*, you say… Humph, just morbid curiosity, that's all. Well, *that girl's* random idea brought one of the fields back to life. That's enough to make my subjects worship her like a god. I already knew this, but there's only so much stupidity a man can take!"

Lyp pounded his fist on the desk and ground his teeth in anger. Her popularity with his subjects had hit a nerve. That was easy enough for Al to imagine, since he accompanied her every day to tour Lyp's lands. Priscilla aside, the people who inhabited Lyp's baronry had a very low opinion of him. To say he had lost their trust and respect would be an understatement.

Al was annoyed at the idea that the old man had called him into his library just to gripe at him.

"Not to *defend* the Princess, but you may be wrong about her idea of bringing *one* of the fields back to life. She has produced results in every village of yours that she has visited—even in villages with different soil conditions. Though, if you're skeptical about her keen eye, I would agree with you."

“Keen eye? A bunch of rubbish! What *that girl* possesses is much more repulsive. How else would rumors of her being the *Bloody Bride* be born?”

When Lyp voiced the name out loud, Al's shoulders froze midshrug. Seeing Al's reaction, Lyp gave a sinister smile as if to say, *At last, I've hit the nail on the head.*

Bloody Bride was a label Priscilla had earned before she took on the name of Bariel. Though she was a young maiden of only twenty years, Lyp was not her first husband. He was her eighth.

All seven prior marriages had been broken. The reason being the deaths of her husbands. In other words, Priscilla had a history of seven marriages ending in her husband's death.

None of her husbands' deaths had the same cause—death in battle, death by illness, death by accident—and while Priscilla was suspected of having a hand in every death, she had escaped the consequences of that suspicion and made it to where she was today.

Because of this, to those who knew of her history, she was called by the ominous name of the Bloody Bride. And yet men would still line up for a chance at her hand…because Priscilla's beauty made them forget about those ominous rumors. Ironic, really.

But Al thought that Lyp was the exception. This was in part due to his diminished sex drive as an older man, but more than anything, it was due to his sanity in the face of Priscilla's magnetism. From the way he griped about her now, this was quite clear.

In other words, this old man had a different reason for marrying her. And his reason could only be one thing—

"Without the upcoming royal selection, I wouldn't have dared put such a cunning vixen under my roof. She'll smile sweetly at you one minute, then sass you the next without any limitation. The contest she held to appoint you her knight was an example of that."

"Wow…you sure don't mince words, do you? Aren't you worried I'll tell her what you said and sour your marriage?"

Lyp's resentment was on full display in both his words and in his malicious gaze. The royal selection was a big to-do that shook Lugunica. It was a period of trials before the ritual with the Holy Dragon that selected a new monarch to replace the royal family, who had been wiped out by disease. As Lyp oversaw the prophecy that foretold the kingdom's future, he had acquired information about the royal selection before the royal family fell ill.

So as a preemptive measure, he'd taken Priscilla—who qualified as a candidate—as his wife in an attempt to gain supreme executive power over the kingdom through her.

His intentions were clear as day, and it was a conclusion anyone who knew Lyp could easily draw. But Al still didn't expect to hear everything so bluntly from the horse's mouth. Lyp had somehow known Al would *not* draw his sword and strike him down on the spot out of loyalty to Priscilla.

Lyp smirked deviously at Al, who was obviously frustrated. "Would you really do something so foolish? A mercenary shrewdly chases after what will benefit him. I doubt a former sword slave like you would risk throwing his life away over a trivial thing like *loyalty*."

"Well…that's very astute of you," Al said, lowering his hand from his sword hilt to accentuate his lack of adversarial intent to Lyp. "But what exactly do you want with me, then? I assume you've got big plans in mind, but I doubt it's anything I can help ya with."

"Not at all true. You wouldn't be standing where you are now without my approval, after all. In that chaotic contest full of barbarians, the other four who'd been at the top with you were my pawns."

"Phew, talk about a rigged match."

"And *that girl's* whims practically ruined it. I need to make sure as many people as possible in that girl's circle agree with me. I think you know why that is."

If Priscilla's reckless abandon could not be calculated, he had to control those around her if there was any hope in correcting her course when the need arose. It was an inevitable chain of events. But then that begged the question…

"What about her servant Schult? The princess picked him up off the street herself, remember?"

"I've had the same conversation with him as I'm having with you now. As a recent orphan, luxury is entirely out of his reach… All I had to do was promise him some wealth, and he flew to my side before I could count to two. Just goes to show what *that girl's* judge of character amounts to."

"Oooh."

Al remembered how Schult had waxed poetic about doing anything for Priscilla. Still, it didn't surprise him one bit. Putting one's own needs first was human nature. If someone's loyalty was

born only out of kind treatment, it was only natural that their heart would be swayed by someone who treated them with more kindness. And Al was no exception to this rule.

"All right, Master, I think I know now what you want from me. So I'd like for you to tell me what benefits I'll receive and what you want me to do for you, moving forward."

"Heh-heh… Good, that's what I wanted to hear. I'll do no harm to you or to Priscilla. For my plan to succeed, it's vital that she remain in good health. *That girl*…and the boy…and you… I want for you all to be happy and content under my care, you see!"

Lyp cheerfully chuckled, pleased by Al's answer. And as he chuckled, Al murmured quietly under his breath, "Sorry, Princess," to the mistress he was about to betray.

But even in his mind, the image of Priscilla that appeared in the back of his mind smirked proudly, as if she had won.

6

A knight named Gilian Endymion visited the Bariel baronry.

With a fearless face and a valiant gaze, he was a very handsome man. His golden hair sparkled in the sunlight, and his slender yet muscular frame held an elegance quite different from Al's bulky body. His well-made knight's clothing brought out his charms, and the jewelry on the sword hanging from his belt was not just for show. Even an amateur could see that clearly.

From head to toe, he was a true and elite knight—this was the impression the young Gilian gave.

"He's the third-eldest son of the House of Endymion. While his two elder brothers help their father run the family lands, he departed on a quest to make a name for himself as a swordsman. And he's asked the master of the house today if he may sojourn here."

Introducing the handsome man was none other than Lyp Bariel. And it need not be stated that the old man did not introduce the knight to Al, Schult, or any of his other servants. Gazing uninhibitedly at the knight was the baron's wife, Priscilla.

"I understood your simple speech, but I don't see the meaning in introducing such a person to me," she said. "Unless—understanding your old life is coming to an end—you're trying to get me interested in some other man. Surely, you haven't lost your

mind."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lyp answered. "What kind of man would give up a beautiful wife like you? Consider our welcoming him today to be a small kindness on my part, making his wish come true."

"A small kindness? That doesn't sound like you," Priscilla scoffed. She showed no sign whatsoever of believing Lyp. While on the surface, the baron maintained a certain level of peace and calm, he was visibly angry inside.

"My lord and lady, I apologize most humbly for my sudden intrusion and my insolent request." Gilian bowed elegantly, his smooth, deep voice sounding almost feminine. He dropped to one knee before Priscilla and said, "However, ever since I heard rumors of Lady Priscilla on the Bariel baronry, I have longed for the day that I should meet you. And now I am basking in the manifestation of celestial beauty."

"Well, well…at least you've got good manners. Yes, my beauty is indeed not of this world. It is an anomaly, descended from eternity. What a sinful maiden I am."

As Gilian sung her praises, Priscilla cheerfully glanced at Al. Standing behind her carrying out his duties, he shrugged in place of a cynical smile.

"Very well. Out of the goodness of my heart, I shall let you pay homage to me, sir knight. Consider it a blessing," Priscilla said curtly, quietly extending her hand.

"I shall. I am blessed and grateful." Gilian handled her white fingertips like glass, then kissed her hand. That sight alone was more than enough to make it seem like the final scene of some fairy tale.

"Now, geezer, this man you've brought home received my preliminary approval, but what do you want from his visit? You mentioned showing kindness earlier…"

"It's quite simple. I've been very busy with work as of late, so I can't accompany you when you tour our lands. I've been worried all that time that wandering about alone would irritate you."

"Though he looks like a clown, I do have Al—and you would only get in the way if you came along anyway. I am in no mood to babysit you. No thank you very much."

Where Lyp carefully chose his words, Priscilla let the insults fly with reckless abandon. Veins began to pop on Lyp's balding

forehead. But the old man didn't let his smile fade. "Now, don't say that. What I meant to say was that to keep you company during the day while I can't, I've brought this nice young man for you. He is a true gentleman. Very kind with women. I'm sure you'll like him."

"If I may be so bold, Lady Priscilla, I shall make every endeavor to live up to my reputation. I would be honored to serve you, if I may."

Just as Lyp was about to lose his self-control, Gilian stepped up to cover for him. Unlike Lyp, there was nothing forced about Gilian's sincerity. Priscilla tilted her head left and right in thought. Then with a glance at Al, she said, "Very well. If nothing else, I suppose it's not a bad thing to have a better-looking man than this walking helmet to look at. Your proposal is well received."

"…You've made a good choice. Sir Gilian, take good care of my wife."

"Yes, my lord! On my life."

It was a rather exaggerated and theatrical way of putting it, but this resonated surprisingly well with Priscilla. Gilian had brought his land dragon with him—a beautiful dragon with blue scales. This fine dragon, which looked like it came with a lengthy pedigree, was an utter delight to Priscilla's eye for beauty.

Handling the creature elegantly, he straddled it with Priscilla at her coaxing. With his white teeth gleaming, Gilian dashingly steered the dragon past the mansion and into the distance.

"Good, they're finally gone. That hateful hag always says things that makes me grind my teeth."

When the two were finally gone, Lyp sighed, letting all the tension drain from his shoulders. Al chuckled softly at his fast change of tune. Then he looked in the direction where Priscilla and Gilian had disappeared and said, "Gilian Endymion… Is he one of your pawns, too, Master?"

"Of course he is. But unlike my other pawns, Gilian needed a different kind of finesse. I went out of my way to ask the distant House of Endymion for help. It took a lot of time to work out this plan. Unlike that tournament of hers, where she didn't care where a man was from so long as he was a strong fighter, it required a special kind of effort to erase any ties he and I have."

"You are thorough in all ways with your schemes, I see. I respect you for that, Master, truly."

"Humph. And in helping with my scheme, you're no different.

Now come. I must speak with you about why I had Gilian meet with *that girl*, and what the next phase of the plan is."

Lyp nodded, the hem of his robe swishing as he returned into the mansion. Following behind him, Al paused and turned to look into the direction Priscilla had flown.

And though this should have been obvious, he couldn't see a trace of her.

7

Whenever they schemed, they always met in the library. Perhaps Lyp had an affinity for it. Breathing through his mouth to avoid the foul stench his nose could never adjust to, Al pondered that.

"There's no telling what prying ears might be hiding in my study. This library alone is safe. For generations, the Bariels have used this library to conduct secret meetings."

Though Lyp shouldn't be able to see Al's expressions through his helmet, he had the uncanny ability to read Al's mind at times. In the library, the old man's senses were sharp. Perhaps a big part of this was due to the fact that the event his hopes and dreams were riding on—the opening day of the royal selection—was fast approaching.

"I reckon things are getting pretty busy at the royal capital right now," Al offered.

"The castle is in utter chaos, like they didn't see it coming. They should have known long ago that this kingdom and the royal bloodline are practically beyond salvation. But they turned a blind eye to the problem and put off arrangements for their kingdom's future, and now the chickens are coming home to roost. Those inept bastards. They have no idea what they're doing!"

Lyp's hackles rose higher and higher as he spoke, the veins on his forehead popping. Looking as though he might blow an artery any second, he had only just revealed the prophecy of which he had spoken days prior.

News of the royal family's demise spread throughout the city, and the higher nobles were already on the move toward enacting the royal selection. But they were all a couple steps behind Lyp.

"I thought you'd enjoy one-upping the people you hate?" Al asked.

"Well, I thought I would. But the only thing it's done is made

me resent those fools even more for giving me the cold shoulder all this time. Council of Elders, my ass. Just a gaggle of senile fools whose only qualifications are title and age. Miklotov, that inept governing sage of the council, and that Bordeaux, who's a fool down to his brain marrow—I'd love to uproot the lot and feed them to demon beasts."

"Gee, you sound angry, my lord."

Al had been the one to steer the conversation in that direction, but trash-talking people he didn't know still bored him. Giving lackluster replies, Al stole a glance at Schult, who was shrinking back in a corner of the room. He didn't seem to understand what he was doing there. He had been staring at the floor since he got there.

"Now, enough griping about the fools at the capital. It's a waste of time. The royal selection is at long last here. We must talk about that."

"Did you tell them the princess is one of the candidates?"

"Of course. I have to tell them that the account on the Dragon Tablet is genuine. They'll need to know that the candidates' Lugunica badges must shine to prove this. Ideally, I would have given the shining task to Priscilla so I could claim that she was the first in line. However…" With a cynical smirk, Lyp cut off. "Right when I announced the prophecy, a badge of one of the higher nobles shone. One of the candidates being there was my only miscalculation."

"Dang, whoever that person is, they're pretty lucky. By the way, whose badge shone?"

"Duchess Karsten…Crusch Karsten. Little brat, shamelessly taking the title from her father even though she's nothing but a girl. She's a savage sword-lover and a famous weirdo who drags an eccentric servant around with her. What did the badge see in her, I wonder? Well…I suppose that's a pointless question, seeing as how Priscilla was also chosen."

As the old man sighed, Al smirked. The exact same thought had crossed his mind.

The Kingdom of Lugunica had badges with Dragon Jewels—if a Dragon Jewel shone, its owner was a candidate in the royal selection. In the royal selection, these five people were located and made to compete against one another for the throne.

However, many components of the requirements to be selected as a candidate were not revealed. Similarities, blood, not even

blessings were considered decisive blows nowadays.

"By the way, Master, how did you discover the Princess was a candidate?"

"…I am under no obligation to tell you that. I spoke too much, but don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong. All you need to do is follow my orders. The matter is closed."

"…Very well," Al said, obediently backing off.

When Lyp saw the compliant look on Al's quiet face, he exhaled long and hard out his nose. Then the old man clicked his tongue at the boy standing in the corner of the room and said, "Are you going to be there forever? I've made time in my busy schedule to speak with you. Maybe try standing at attention instead of shriveling into a corner."

"Y-yes, my lord… Please excuse me…"

Schult marched over to the ebony desk in the back of the room where Lyp was seated. Seeing a stack of books from the case on the floor, Al plunked his bottom down onto it.

"I won't drag this out longer than it needs to be. Back to the topic at hand—Gilian. My plan is to appoint him as Priscilla's knight."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up, Master. What happens to me, then?" Al interjected, raising a hand. "The only reason I get to live here is because I'm the Princess's knight."

"Don't worry, I won't throw you out. I never toss out valuable pawns that easily, and it would be a bother keeping your mouth shut otherwise. I will make a place for you here at my house, though not as a knight. You don't need to worry."

"It's not that part I'm worried about…but why do you need to go through all the trouble to swap out knights? Of course, I'm sure the fact that he's your pawn is a big part of it…"

"Oh, it's quite simple. The people prefer a person in power with a knight who looks the part. Gives a better impression. Since we're in a place where non-royalty will ascend the throne, public support will not be given unconditionally as it has in the past. Foolish and simpleminded peasants need an image that is easy to understand and that they can be enthusiastic about."

During Lyp's fervent speech, Al raised a surprisingly respectful eyebrow. In other words, it was a branding campaign. By assigning a photogenic knight to the princess, she would make a better impression on the masses. In a competition where candidates would

vie for the throne, this would have an impact that couldn't be ignored. It was narrow-minded, of course, but setting that aside—

"You'll stoop to any low to increase her chances of winning. I really respect you for that," Al said.

"I don't care for the way you phrased that, but no matter. Gilian is a perfect representation of what the peasants think a knight should be—I have no complaints. And going just off looks, Priscilla was attracted to him at first glance—abominably so. All the advance preparations are rock-solid."

"Uhh, except we've got just one little problem."

He was raining on the old man's parade, but Al did have his doubts about his overly confident scheme. Facing the old man's ill-tempered gaze, Al fiddled with the metal mechanisms of his helmet as he explained, "Aren't you worried she'll overturn your proposal? *She* appointed me her knight herself through that exhibition *she* held. I'm just a *bit* concerned that this is a matter where she won't be flexible."

"Oh, so that's all. That's a silly concern; don't worry about it." With a scoff at Al's comments, Lyp drummed his fingers on the desk and said, "He's a handsome knight, and you're a clown in a helmet —I think you already know who *that girl* will choose. Unless you have a reason to be confident she would prefer you over him?"

"Weeeell, not exactly. His game is better than mine, ten times out of ten. Not to mention, if it came down to a sword fight, it's possible he'd beat me there, too."

"See? There you have it." Giving Al's pathetic answer a satisfied nod, Lyp leaned back in his desk chair with a *creak*.

Al got the gist of what the old man's plan entailed. It was all things he could agree with. Except…

"Um, M-Master…"

While Al rationalized the plan, somebody else timidly raised a questioning hand—it was Schult.

"What? You want a turn to shit on my scheme, too, boy?"

"N-not at all, Master! Um, it's j-just that… Well, Princess Priscilla is…" Shrinking under Lyp's harsh gaze, Schult gulped and continued, "You aren't going to be hurting her, are you, Master? You're doing this for her… You've thought everything through to make her the monarch, right?"

"Ah…so that's your concern. Don't bother me with trivial things. I've told you my end goal many times. I need Priscilla for

my plan, so why would I harm her?" Lyp scoffed at Schult's very age-appropriate worry. "It's my job to open the path for *that girl* to ascend the throne. And *if* she happens to resist the royal selection, I will urge her to participate. Consider that your job as well, both of you."

"Well, based on her personality, I can't imagine a universe where she *would* bow out of the royal selection."

For one thing, she always accepted any challenge thrown at her, and for another, she spoke as if this world were made for her. If she was presented with a way to gain control of the kingdom legally, of course she would take it.

Al smirked as he imagined Priscilla obliviously marching her way up to the throne.

"Is that so, Master? W-well, I'm glad to hear it…"

Schult also seemed relieved by Lyp's answer. Even though he was helping Lyp for a reward, it seemed he had not lost the indebtedness he felt after Priscilla rescued him. Priscilla would win the throne, and he would win a reward. To the boy, it was a win-win.

However, the exhilarated emotions of the two servants…

"She's difficult to handle, but if I make her my puppet with a curse, I can manipulate her at will. I'll sit my puppet on the throne, and the kingdom shall be mine, as it should be."

…were crushed to pieces when Lyp revealed the final stage of the plan to them.

"……What?" Unable to grasp the meaning of it, Schult could only whisper hoarsely.

With a vicious smile on his face, the old man shrugged in reply. "What, you didn't hear me? That girl's troublesome sense of self will only hinder me. I turned a blind eye to her antics before, but once the royal selection has officially started, each and every move she makes will fall under heavy scrutiny; I cannot let her run wild and do whatever she wants. So after the announcement at the castle, I'll take away her consciousness and make her my puppet."

"…Are you even capable of that?" Al asked.

"Yes, I doubt either of you could imagine it. This world is filled with demands hideous beyond imagination. And there are convenient persons who help mediate with shamans. This connection of mine goes a long way back."

Lyp's scheme was realistic, not that of fairy tales. He would use

a shaman to steal Priscilla's sense of self. It seemed entirely possible.

"Th-this isn't what we signed up for!" Schult's voice cracked. Unlike Al, he was not so willing to accept reality. "Didn't you just promise you wouldn't hurt Princess Priscilla?!"

"I didn't say I wouldn't do *anything* to her. All I said is I would not *harm* her. If *that girl* is harmed, I can kiss the throne good-bye. I have no intentions of harming her body. Really, I don't see the problem."

"But if Princess Priscilla… If she stops being herself…then what's the point…?!"

Lyp turned a displeased face toward Schult, who was shivering. The color of cruelty beginning to fill his eyes was proof that the boy's usefulness and annoyingness were swinging at opposite sides of a scale.

"Oh, cut the noble bullshit, *boy*. I bought you with the promise of a reward. You have already betrayed her. You have no right to plead on her behalf after everything you've done. What, unless *that girl's* allure bewitched you, too? There is nothing more shameful for a man than falling victim to a prostitute's spell…but it does give me an idea."

With a disgusting smile on his lips, Lyp rose to his feet and leaned over his desk, bringing his face close to Schult's. "If you want to have your way with *that girl*, I'll let you—*after* she's on the throne. I don't understand what you see in those lumps of fat, but I suppose you animals are drooling at the idea?"

"_____!"

His contempt for women was plain to see when he dragged Priscilla through the mud. Red in the face from the insults, Schult reached his dainty arms toward Lyp's neck. But Lyp easily dodged him, grabbing a pistol lying on his desk and whipping Schult in the chest with it. Letting out a sharp cry of pain, Schult collapsed onto the library floor.

"Attacking your Master… This is why I hate hiring undisciplined stray dogs." Lyp looked down at Schult, who was writhing and moaning on the floor from the merciless beating. Lyp's movement just then was too sharp for a man approaching seventy. It was a testament to how years of endlessly blazing ambition kept a body filled with energy.

"Burn to death for all I care. Let your organs smolder, blow

smoke from every orifice in your puny body. Seeing your pitiful demise will make up for the humiliation you've caused me."

As Lyp aimed the handgun at Schult and sentenced him, he looked down at the boy as if he were about to squash an insect. His rising mana shook the air in the library, the waves it manifested trampling the little body on the floor, changing the being known as Schult to dust—

"…What do you think you're doing?"

"Sorry, coach, the ball came outta nowhere, and I just had to kick it at the Croatia goalkeeper."

Just before Schult was burned to dust, Al's liuyedao shot right at the pistol. The sword struck the gun from below, sending it flying. Lyp's lips twisted with rage.

"Why are you protecting that little shit? Just shut up and do what you're told. I thought you knew your place, bastard!!"

"Ooh, I'd keep that anger in check, Master. You'll pop a coronary. Yeah, sorry, I dunno why my arm moved on its own…"

As Lyp fumed, Al flippantly exposed his true feelings. Even he didn't know why he had protected Schult. Looking at it rationally, it would be most beneficial to Al to go along with Lyp's plan. And yet Al had defended Schult when he stood up to Lyp, making an enemy of the old man.

How…or why…he did not know.

"Sir Al…you…"

Behind the clownish Al, Schult groaned and looked up at him.

"If it hurts, Schulty, go ahead and cry. It'll be our little secret."

Ignoring Al's quip, Schult painfully squeezed out the words, "Sir Al…you also…love Princess Priscilla, don't you…?"

The moment he heard the words, Al's whole being was hit with an electric shock. After a very long breath out, Al finally understood.

"Yeah…wow…I feel so stupid. Nice one, Al… Why'd it take ya so long to notice something so simple?"

Now that he'd had his epiphany, he could finally jump off the fence he was stuck on and give his answer.

"So you've noticed she bewitched you? Then move at—"

"I get it. I finally get it. I really am a dumbass. I should've noticed it sooner."

Turning his head to the side, Al shrugged, gripping his liuyedao just as hard and said, "I should've realized that I can't be the evil

sidekick of some old fart who doesn't appreciate the horny cuteness of the princess!"

"Why—you imbecile!!" Lyp blustered, pulling the desk drawer free with his left hand and flinging it at Al.

Al slashed at the hurling object with his liuyedao, kicked Lyp into the pile of books on the floor, and yelled, "Schult! Get out of here! I'll take care of the rest somehow!"

"Urk! Oh…yes, sir, right away!"

His face twisting in pain, Schult ran for his life toward the door and shot out of the room, not looking back. He made a wise decision. But Lyp sneered at this and said, "Just how foolish can you both be?! Why do you think I summoned only the two of you to the library? Everyone else in this mansion is already my coconspirator. If he leaves the library, that boy's fate is sealed!"

"Dang, you're thorough. But fate's a fickle bitch. What if, say, I take you hostage…?"

"You think you can restrain me, *boy*? I didn't make a name for myself on the battlefield as a young man for nothing. Not even Bordeaux can get the best of me in battle!"

The violent spirit surging from Lyp as he howled showed that he wasn't just all bark. The pistol in his hand was a metia. It likely sapped magic power from his servants. It was a simple effect, but because of it, there was no way to fight against it.

Comparing their stats, Al immediately realized he was not at an advantage. And that meant—

"All the criteria have been met. Now nothing's holding me back from using my trump card."

"You fool…"

"Yeah, I'm a fool. And this isn't personal, old man. You were just unlucky… No, scratch that—"

Al cut off there and smirked, a cynical echo in his voice as he said:

"___You were born under a bad star."

With a grunt, Lyp raised his pistol without hesitation and unleashed his magic energy. Traveling through the palm of his hand and through his pistol, his mana reached overwhelming power levels. The burst of magic that shot from the tip of his metia was over five times stronger than usual.

It made direct contact with the torso of the joking helmeted knight, exploding in the center of his warped body. The foul stench

of burning flesh filled the room, and flecks of scattered gore dotted the library shelves.

With a loud *crash*, the head, helmet, and liuyedao rolled on the floor. Lyp gave a bored look at the carnage and said, "'Trump card'? Hah. Rubbish. Everything about that man was rubbish."

Darting through the bloody library, Lyp headed for the door. The chances of Schult rendezvousing with Priscilla were slim, but there would be a problem if he did. He had to find the boy and dispose of him as soon as possible. Thinking this, Lyp reached for the doorknob.

"___You were born under a bad star."

"Hmmf?!"

Lyp whirled around in shock at the unexpected voice. And there was a man, standing with his back to Lyp. He was wearing a helmet and holding a liuyedao in his one arm—

"Huh? Where did he—?"

"GRAAAH!!!"

Ignoring the goofy man's voice, Lyp sent magic into his pistol and burned the man to death again. The flames scorched him to a crisp, and his helmet crumbled to pieces as he screamed.

Carnage soiled the walls and floor of the library once more, and Lyp recoiled at the confusing scene before him.

"Wh-what is this? What just… What just happened…?"

Realizing he was trembling, Lyp breathed slowly in and out. His forehead was soaked with cold sweat. Roughly wiping it with his sleeve, the old man looked up, trying to make sense of the situation and—

"___You were born under a bad star."

Again…he heard the man's voice.

8

"___You were born under a bad star."

He heard it. The voice, pounding against his earlobes.

"Huh? Where did he go?"

Before his eyes, the man who lost his enemy looked right and left. Then he turned around, noticed the man sitting behind and looking up at him, and readjusted his liuyedao. However—

"Huh—you're not in the mood anymore. From the way you look…guess it was the *aggressor* pattern this time. Now I get it.

Dang, you've really got the worst luck, man."

With a sympathetic tone in his voice, the man crouched before the old man slumped on the floor. He was drooling, not even trying to look up at the man crouching above him.

"You were so healthy just a second ago, but ya aged quite a bit all at once. I've got no idea how many times we've done this, but I hope ya didn't snuff it just from the second time? Not like there's any way for me to check that."

"___ll me."

"Hmm?"

The helmeted man gave the murmuring old man a confused look. The man jerkily lifted his face to look up at the man. "Kill me…please…"

The old man yearned for it, as if that was his only salvation. The helmeted man shrugged in pity over the old man's desperate wish.

"Poor guy. Guess a lack of appreciation for horny cuteness is enough to cause an eternal crash."

The helmeted man rose to his feet, lightly gripped his liuyedao, and aimed for the old man's neck. Then the blade swung uncertainly, sending the old man's head flying in the air, an arc of bright-red blood trailing behind it.

At long last, the old man's nightmare—

"___You were born under a bad star."

—didn't end.

9

Al dragged Lyp out of the library. His hair had completely fallen out, and his eyes were sunken in. He was murmuring deliriously, drooling profusely. The old man had completely lost his mind.

"Y'know, I feel kinda guilty about this. Wonder why."

As he dragged the old man's heavy body, Al was making himself cringe. Neutralizing without killing—in the long run, neutralizing was the optimal solution, but how was this any less vicious than what Lyp had schemed for Priscilla?

"Well, better it happen to a shitty old geezer than a hot chick.

That definitely takes the edge off."

Quickly justifying his own actions, Al continued to the front hall of the mansion. Since Schult had nobody else to turn to, he would have needed to run outside, though—

"Sir Al!"

Just as Al reached the grand staircase in the front hall, which connected the first two floors of the house, he heard a voice calling him from below. He looked and saw a crowd of servants gathered in the front hall, with Schult standing in front of the door. And the icing on the cake: Beside the boy stood—

"My, you sure caused a ruckus in my absence."

With her hand on her hip and the knight by her side, she appeared needlessly pompous. She gazed up at Al on the stairs, gave a pouting snort, and said, "Al, stop staring down at me like that, you disrespectful oaf. Come down at once and explain what happened during my absence."

"Uhh…copy that. I'll come down when I feel like it."

"That sounds like a man who has no intention of coming down."

Priscilla winked one eye, forgiving Al for his little joke at the top of the grand staircase. But then a flustered man interrupted their little master-servant banter.

"Now wait just a minute, Lady Priscilla! Hasn't that man in the helmet done something to Baron Lyp?" Gilian pointed.

"Mmm? Well, would you look at that? That's the old geezer Al's dragging. What happened, then? Did that geezer finally despair over his own stupidity and hang himself?"

Gilian was shocked by Priscilla's insensitive reaction, but Al smirked at her behavior as he hoisted Lyp up and said, "Nope, not dead. Well, his *body* is not dead, if we're gonna be technical about it. But his soul seems to have died suddenly."

"Sudden death?" Priscilla asked in acceptance, completely devoid of emotion. "Well, he is at that age. That sort of thing happens to the elderly."

Gilian barked back, "Do you honestly expect me to let those dumb excuses slide?!" He took a step in front of Priscilla, drew the sword from his belt, and thrust it toward Al, who was still on the stairs. "You monster… I overlooked your grotesque appearance because I heard you were Lady Priscilla's servant. But it appears you were a fool I should not have allowed to walk free. What you

did to Baron Lyp is heinous."

"Again, dude's not dead."

"However! Those poisoned fangs of yours shall never bare themselves at Lady Priscilla. From this day forth, I shall take on the task of being her protector!"

As Gilian huffed and puffed, he further solidified his image as a champion of justice. Meanwhile, Al on the staircase looked like a villain (in part because he was holding a living corpse in his arms).

Every servant in the hall held their breath and waited to see how things would play out. Having said that, the only one of them who was truly worried for Al was Schult. All the other servants were Lyp's pawns. Even if Gilian did manage to push through, their future prospects were quite grim.

And the conditions for Al's trump card had not been met yet. *What should I do now?* he mused to himself.

"It would seem you've accepted you are at a disadvantage," Gilian said. "Then die honorably by my sword. I don't know what sort of nefarious scheme you've concocted, but I shall ensure Lady Priscilla's safety from now on. I shall give her days of constant peace and make her a happy bride!"

Energized, Gilian took a step forward, aiming to kill Al in one fell swoop. But just before his first foot could kick off the ground running—

"Days of constant peace—how boring." Priscilla yawned.

Then she stabbed Gilian in the back with her crimson sword.

"Wha…? Ah?!"

Gilian fell onto the stairs with a shocked cry, a gaping wound in his back. Priscilla kicked him onto his back and thrust the tip of her blade at the horrified man's handsome nose.

"I was looking forward to see what kind of line you'd use to try to seduce me, but now I see you're a boring man both on dragon-back and in a duel. And the final nail in the coffin—you wish to gift me days of constant peace? You are lord of the plebs."

"What…are you…?"

"What value is there in a tomorrow just like today? Constant *anything* is boring. Show me something novel and new. And if you can't do that, then you can go ahead and die, rot, become fertilizer, and then become a tree so I won't have to look at you anymore, damn fool."

Priscilla rained merciless insults down upon the man who had

been intent on courting her favor. By then, Gilian could only half understand what the red woman before him was saying. And before he ever could reach an understanding, his chance would be stolen for eternity.

"Whoa…"

Gilian's body suddenly burst into flame on the stairs. The flames, igniting from the wound in his back, shrouded the handsome man—Gilian Endymion—in an inferno from which he could not escape. His throat set ablaze, Gilian could not even cry out in anguish as he burned away.

"Princess…don't ya think maybe we should put him out before the house catches fire?"

"Nonsense. Those flames were born from my Sunlight Blade. It burns only what I tell it to."

It was incomprehensible logic, but the fire wasn't climbing along the carpet on the stairs. Apparently, Priscilla's claim was somehow true. Al could only sigh tiredly at her usual exceptionalism. Incidentally, the crimson blade she had drawn out of nowhere suddenly vanished into thin air.

"Well, I guess only an idiot would be surprised by your sleight of hand by now, Princess. But anyway, what're we gonna do about all this mess, burning man included?"

"I dislike the stench of burning flesh, no matter how many times I smell it. You lot, dispose of it."

Without hesitation, the servants Priscilla commanded whisked away Gilian, who was now a completely blackened lump. Seeing this, it finally dawned on Al.

"Lemme guess, Princess…you knew what the old fart was plotting all along?"

"From the very start, he never hid his intentions to use me to seize power in the kingdom. It wasn't hard to imagine what sort of tactics the geezer would employ to do so. It is only natural to clip an eager moth's wings before it can fly into a lantern."

"Hardcore… You're on a whole different level."

Al couldn't help but laugh at the image—an old man with a deeply seated ambition that had been burning for so many years, and the hand that'd been pulling his strings all along. Not only had he lacked the support of the subjects of the baronry, he also had no true allies in the mansion, either. And the one ally he had managed to grasp was now a pile of ash.

“By the way, if you were really ten chess moves ahead and were ready to do the old man in, why didn’t you tell me and Schult about it? I could’ve avoided all that weird playacting.”

“Because you have no talent for it—just take a look. Schult is no better. Look how flustered he gets by the mere sight of me. It was a strain to hold myself back from laughing all those times.”

“Uh, um…P-Princess Priscilla…” Schult approached Priscilla and Al, who had let Lyp fall onto the stairs while they had their chat. Priscilla folded her arms to accentuate her breasts, and Schult’s eyes wandered in confusion.

Perhaps the boy wanted to apologize for nearly conspiring against her. But he would have to choose his words wisely lest her wrath befall him. Just as Al was steeling himself to stand up for the boy if needed—

“Thank goodness you’re all right, my lady… *Sniff!* I… *Sniff!* …I was so worried…”

“Hmm.”

When he saw Schult’s face, wet with tears and snot, Al sighed over his own stupidity. How could he measure a boy barely over ten years old with so much foolish knowledge pushed onto him? That pitiful old geezer, who’d decided how everything should be and never bothered to look at how things were, left this world a lonely man with nobody truly on his side—he had seen it with his own eyes.

“Oh, Schult, you are such a lovable little fellow. Come! I’ll let you get my dress dirty just this once.”

“Wapf!”

Priscilla brought the sobbing Schult to her, happily wiping his face with her dress. Then she hugged the dazed boy to her bosom and turned to Al.

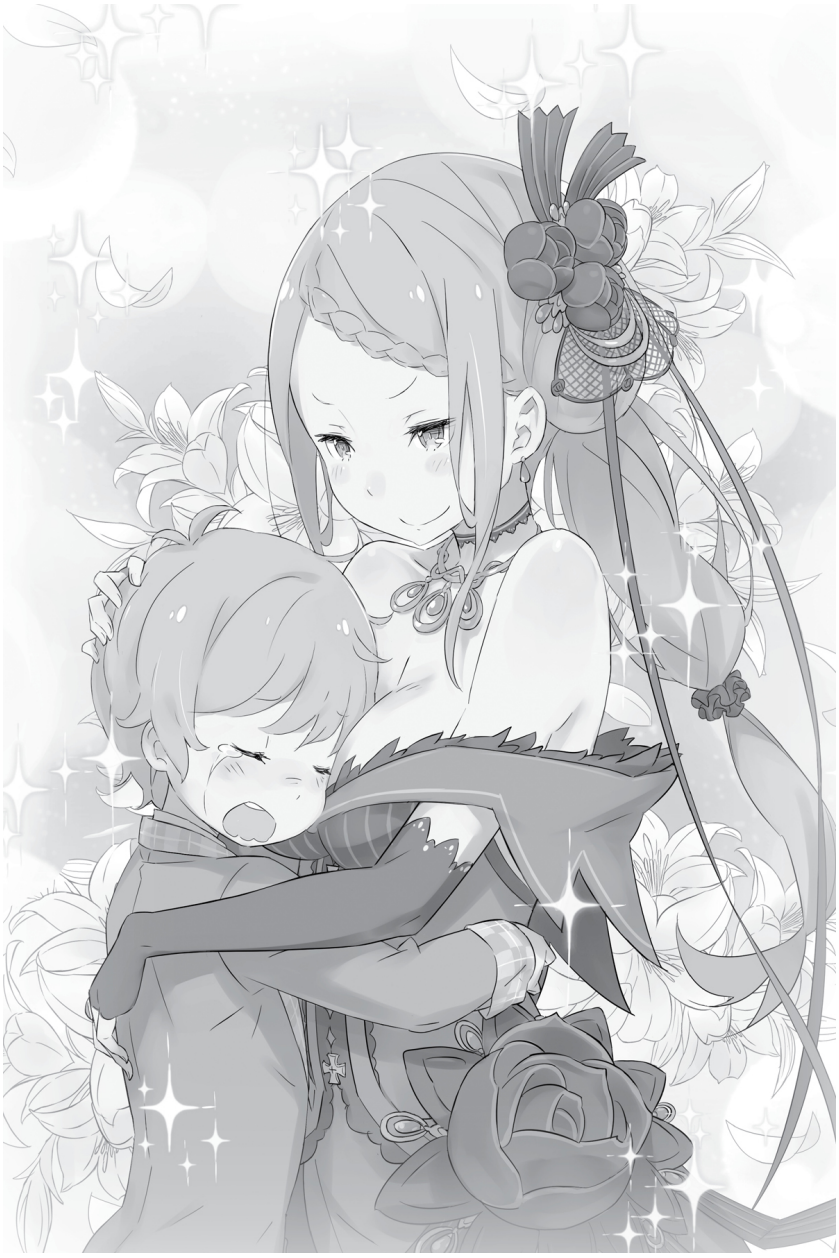
“Way to make a guy jealous.”

“You should already know this, but you were right to choose me. I’ll praise you for that.”

“Hey, if the choices are an old fart and a horny-cute girl, I’ll choose the girl every time. Anybody would. And I’ll do that from now on.”

“How frank… I rather like that. Now then—” She glanced at Lyp, who was lying on the floor with glazed eyes, and gave a little snort. “In a rather sad turn of events, my legal husband has just lost his power as lord of these lands. This puts the future of the Bariel

baronry in jeopardy. I have no choice but to assume the full rights and responsibilities as a member of this household. Is that not so?”



“A good wife carries out the will of her beloved husband, struggling with unfamiliar bureaucratic work. The devoted acts of a beautiful girl—it’s a real tearjerker. I’m already crying.”

“Sharp tongue you’ve got.”

“You too, Princess.”

The like-minded master and servant laughed and smiled in satisfaction. The matter of title was settled. It was a good start.

Then there was Schult, his face pressing deep into Priscilla’s cleavage and his eyes rolling into the back of his head. Priscilla took his face in both hands and ran her fingers through his hair as she said:

“There, there, what’s wrong, Schult? Laugh, my boy. Your beloved princess is in a great mood. So what is her underling supposed to do? You know the answer, I trust?”

“Y-yes! I do know, Princess!”

Standing up straight and tall, Schult carefully steadied his breath and gave a big smile. Pressing his hands to his cheeks, he forced his face into a smile. Then in the loudest voice he could muster—

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—so be it, my lady!”

“Yes, quite good. Now, once you’ve finished laughing, do you know what it is I want next?”

“You will be wanting tea, my lady!”

“Indeed!”

Pulling her fan from her cleavage and opening it with a *snap*, Priscilla descended the stairs. Al followed behind her, and Schult behind him, laughing until his voice got hoarse.

“Goodness, this is exhilarating. I like this. After all…”

As he listened to her laugh, Al realized why he had chosen her. It wasn’t all that complicated. It was really quite simple—he had been bewitched by her alluring charm.

“…this world bends itself to suit me.”

<Fin>

EMILIA IN WONDERLAND

1

"And this is what he finished with—*It's your heart*. Can you believe it?!"

"Ooh! That's very romantic."

As Subaru snapped his fingers and flashed a smile, Emilia clapped her hands. They were in the garden at Roswaal Manor, in the shade with a gentle breeze, and Subaru was entertaining Emilia with fairy tales from his world.

Subaru told stories quite well with his vivid gestures and movements, and Emilia found herself immersed in the worlds of his stories before she realized it. The way Subaru constantly switched his voice to play the different roles depending on tone or gender dazzled her time and again.

"I'm always surprised by how many stories you know, Subaru. And they're all stories I haven't heard before. It's *really* impressive."

"Well, I'm grateful for my good memory and being born on planet Earth. Giving Emilia-tan little moments of catharsis was a sacred task entrusted to me by Hans Christian Andersen himself."

"Planeterth? And her son?"

"It's the name of the place I used to live and the name of a famous author of children's fairy tales."

Subaru informed the confused Emilia with a wink, but still not quite understanding, she vaguely smiled, pretending to understand. (She figured it was unimportant anyway.)

Two weeks had passed since Subaru came to stay at Roswaal Manor and helped resolve the demon beast incident. His wounds from the battle had healed, and he was already back to his regular servant duties, but he still made time to tell Emilia all sorts of stories like this during his breaks.

To Emilia, who was exhausted from studying reams of unfamiliar material, Subaru's kindness was a godsend. The stories

themselves were also genuinely interesting, so she found herself longing for more every single time.

"Well…now that I've finished that story, though it pains me greatly, I've got to go back to work. What about you, Emilia-tan?" Subaru asked, patting his bottom as he stood up.

Emilia, her silver hair blowing in the breeze, leaned against a tree and mused for a while before saying, "I think I'll stay here a bit longer."

"Yeah? Gotcha, see you later then. If Ram catches me out here, she'll wring my neck."

With that little quip, Subaru jogged back to the mansion. As she watched him, Emilia yawned and stretched. She had gotten so absorbed in her studies the night before that she had stayed up far too long. And as she sat there, in the gentle breeze alone, sleepiness suddenly assaulted her.

"I probably should have…gone back inside with Subaru…," Emilia whispered, as her eyelids grew heavier and heavier.

Admonishing herself, she let her eyelids shut…and a cozy sleepiness slowly visited her.

And just like that, Emilia drifted off—

2

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!"

Emilia was yanked from her near slumber by a sudden voice.

Looking up, she muttered, "Er, what?"

"I'm late! Emergency! I'm not sure why, but I must hurry!"

Emilia looked around for the owner of the voice. When she found him, her eyes grew wide as saucers. Emilia leaned against the tree and spotted an ash-colored cat running straight ahead on two legs. This particular cat was very familiar to Emilia, as he was like family to her. It was her spirit, Puck, racing toward her.

"Puck? Why are you in material form—? Hey! Wait, don't go!"

Puck, who should have fit in the palm of her hand, was about the size of a human child for some reason. As a rule, Puck could change his size at will, but he rarely did so.

When she heard the panic in his voice, Emilia hastily shot to her feet, thinking something might be wrong. But Puck didn't even give Emilia so much as a glance and said, "Ah, what good fortune. I'll just hop down this bottomless hole!"

And with darling little trotting noises, Puck deviated past Emilia and ran behind the tree. Then after a loud shout, she felt Puck's presence grow distant.

"Wait, what?! Puck! Why are you ignoring me? Aww!"

Hurt by the unusual treatment from her family, Emilia scurried behind the tree where he'd gone. There, she found not Puck, but a hole in the middle of an empty patch of ground.

Don't tell me that little shout was him jumping into this hole…

"What's a hole doing here…? Could it be that Subaru is hiding one of his treasures in here…?"

Emilia had basically decided the boy was guilty until proven innocent. Anyway, she carefully inched herself closer to the hole to peek down it. The dark hole was so deep that she couldn't see the bottom. The air seemed like it might suck her in at any moment, and Emilia caught her breath in terror.

"Pu-Puck? Can you hear me? If you can, please answer meee!"

She tried calling down the hole, but all she heard was her own voice bouncing back at her. Starting to panic, Emilia turned around to call someone in the house for help. And then—

"I can't explain anything if you're out there, soooo come on dooown."

"Huh?"

Just when she heard a second familiar voice, Emilia felt somebody yank her from behind. Surprised by the sensation of a pair of arms grabbing her from the hole, she then fell, her surprise transforming into shock.

"No! No way! I-I'm gonna turn into a pancake!"

Falling headfirst into the hole, Emilia felt a chill run down her spine as she imagined her head smacking against the ground. She kicked against the wall to turn herself upright, pushing the floating hem of her skirt down as she figured out a way to safely come to a stop—but before she could, she landed on something soft.

"Eeewah!"

It felt like a stack of papers was cradling her. Emilia kicked and squirmed out of it. She plucked off something that was stuck to her hair and clothes. It turned out they were dead leaves. Apparently, there'd been a pile of them at the bottom of the hole and that was what had broken her fall.

"Phew…that scared the living daylights out of me."

But her relief was fleeting. Emilia nervously glanced at her

surroundings. It looked like she was inside a hollowed-out tree trunk, but it would have to be a tree several centuries old. Plus, she was underground.

"Ah! Puck!"

Emilia was looking around her with a puzzled frown when she caught sight of a tiny cat in a pathway deep in the back of the space, peering out at her. Puck leaped at the sound of her voice and cried out, "Oh dear, I must hurry, or I'll be late!" glancing many times at his bare wrist in an obvious lie.

"But you don't have a watch. This little prank of yours has made me quite cross with you. Now come here!"

As Emilia ran, kicking off the dried leaves as she went, Puck took off in an equally fierce dash. Emilia was startled by his speed, thinking the creature was quite out of place there. Puck's mad dash away from her down the dark pathway made Emilia quickly lose sight of him. But she still ran with all her might, springing out of the dark pathway and into a lit room.

"Err…what is this place? And where's Puck?"

Gasping quietly for breath, Emilia stared at yet another unfamiliar scene before her. Upon closer glance, it was a cute room, colored brightly. It had a table, a furnace, and a vase on the windowsill holding flowers she had never seen before.

"I wonder whose room this is… I hope they won't be angry I barged in like this."

Feeling a very real worry about the strange situation she found herself in, Emilia looked around the room for any sign of Puck or its inhabitant. But since the room wasn't all that big, Emilia quickly learned to her disappointment that Puck was not there. Of course, that wasn't the only reason she was disappointed.

"There's a door leading outside, but I'm far too big to fit through it."

Not even Emilia could hide her frustration over this. Never before had she felt she was significantly taller than the average person, even though all the girls in the mansion—Ram, Rem, and Beatrice—were all shorter than her and very cute.

"No, Emilia, not even Beatrice could fit through a door that small. So whoever built it must have been very careless."

Snapping herself out of her disappointment, Emilia looked around to see if there was some other way out. Then she found a tiny key and a strange medicine bottle on top of the table. The key

was probably for that defective little door. The question that remained was—what was inside the medicine bottle? The label said, *To Emily, with love*.

"……Anne?"

The only person who called her Emily was her much younger friend Annerose, who was a relative of Roswaal's and someone she had spent very little time with. She did not understand why Anne would have left her a gift in that room, but she knew the little girl would mean her no harm. That alone was immediately clear.

"Okay, I'll drink you."

So that's why Emilia gulped the entire potion without hesitation. It was only after she swallowed that she suddenly said, worried, "What if this is a potion that affects my body in some way?"…and the transformation that happened immediately after confirmed her worry.

"Ah—ah—ah!"

Suddenly, the room looked bigger—and bigger—and bigger. The table, which was once at hip height, was suddenly soaring high above her. The windowsill and vase of flowers were high as the sky.

"No, the room didn't get bigger… I got smaller."

Immediately realizing the cause of her metamorphosis, Emilia's eyes widened as she examined the room that now seemed much larger. Then she patted her body all over and was relieved to find her clothes had shrunk with her.

"I mean, people would think me strange if I walked out of here naked. But at least I can go out that door now."

Quickly forgetting to question the cause of her shrinking a bit more, Emilia struck a power pose and marveled over how amazing Anne was. Then she vigorously turned the doorknob—and grunted in disappointment when she realized it was locked. She had left the key on top of the table. Where she could no longer reach.

"Moping won't solve your problem, Emilia… Okay, it's time to climb!"

Emilia's unbreakable spirit was her virtue, but as she rolled up her sleeves and tried to climb the leg of the table, for all her bravery, she was quite reckless. It was then that her violet eyes suddenly spotted something near the leg of the table.

It was a white plate with a cookie set upon it. The plate had a one-page letter on it. She picked it up and read it: *A little insurance in case the little lady's gift gives you trouble*.

There was only one person who had distinctive handwriting like this.

“Oh, what’s this? Did the silly Billy forget her key?”

Confused, Emilia glanced up, cookie in hand, when she heard the voice call to her from above. And looking down at her from the table was Puck, the key swishing back and forth in his long tail. As he stared at Emilia with big, round eyes, there was an uncanny humanness to him.

“Gosh, you’re hopeless. You’re supposed to hit save before making a choice. Everybody knows that. Life is hard and full of bitterness—just like that cookie!”

“Sorry, I don’t quite follow you. And I don’t think a bitter cookie would taste all that good.”

As Puck smiled smugly down at her, Emilia responded with her usual spunk. But it confused her a little—this was more the sort of banter she shared with Subaru, not Puck. Puck was acting like Subaru today.

“Anyway, stop joking around and just give me the key,” she said. “And make it quick. Everyone in the mansion will start to worry about me.”

“You should be more worried about yourself than them. When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you…”

“Hyah.”

“Meowww.”

Annoyed by Puck’s smugness, Emilia commanded the lesser spirits to blast Puck away on a gust of wind. He slammed against the window and dropped the key, which Emilia slid to catch. Then she went straight to the door to unlock it.

“Come on, Puck, stop messing around and let’s go home. Return to your crystal and— Puck?”

Scolding Puck like a child, Emilia turned around to see that Puck was no longer by the window. She frowned. Somehow, he had hidden himself again.

“Seriously! Why are you being such a pain today?”

Huffing with anger, Emilia walked out the door. And there to greet her was a field of grass and, beyond it, a big forest. Emilia was surprised by the unfamiliar scenery, but she still set out toward the woods. And yet…

“No matter how long I walk, I’m not getting any closer to the forest…”

She could see it before her eyes, but no amount of fast walking got her any closer to it. That was because she was small now, and as such, the distance she had to travel had gotten much bigger.

“I’m hungry, too… Oh, that’s right.”

Emilia suddenly remembered she had a cookie. When she unwrapped it, its sweet aroma tickled her empty stomach, enslaving

her mind.

"Thanks for the treat, Mr. Clind."

She spoke a few words of gratitude for the servant of Annerose's family, the one who had written her the letter. The cookie was soft and freshly baked. The flavors dancing on her tongue made Emilia writhe with glee. And then with reluctance, she popped the rest of the cookie in her mouth all at once and—

"Huh? Huuuuh?"

After her sweet treat, she had a look around and noticed the scenery was changing—or rather, her body was getting bigger again, returning to its original size. It was then she understood what the letter had meant by the words *in case the little lady's gift gives you trouble*. She knew she had Clind's thoughtfulness to thank for it.

"Mr. Clind really is great…and now the forest is only a skip away!"

Getting bigger had brought the woods within her reach. It was still very large, even though she was bigger now, but the former anxiety she'd felt over its size had disappeared.

Emilia clenched her fist, struck a power pose, stared at the trees up ahead, and said, "Okay, my adventure begins now!"

It was a rather fatal sort of line to say before bounding into a forest.

3

As you might guess, her adventure did not end there.

It didn't end, but Emilia's feet had stopped moving. And that was after walking for a while down a path lit only by the help of some lesser spirits.

"Stop right there. Fiends like you are not welcome beyond this point, I suppose."

When yet another voice came from above, Emilia's eyes darted around, looking for its owner. Then when she spotted a silhouette of someone lying down on a tree branch, her hands leaped to her mouth to suppress a shriek.

Atop the branch, lying on her side, was Beatrice, glaring down at Emilia with sleepy eyes. She wore her glamorous dress and sausage-roll curls, and she also puffed and snorted through a pipe coming out of her mouth.

"Look at you, sitting on the dirt. What an ill-mannered girl you

are. I wonder what your parents are like."

"Beatrice, you…"

"Humph. Too late now to notice who I am and realize how rude you've been to me. Though, if you repent, I suppose I might forgive you…"

"You're so young; you shouldn't smoke! And you shouldn't smoke even when you grow up! Smoking stunts your growth—Subaru told me so!"

Witnessing the underage girl smoking before her, Emilia slammed her with a rational observation. Beatrice's mouth opened in surprise, the pipe falling from it. Then she glared at Emilia and growled, "H-how humiliating! Treating Betty like a *child*—is your head on straight, I *wonder*?! I am a sophisticated lady! And a pipe is a mark of a sophisticated lady's good taste!"

"See, trying to act grown-up like that… It's kind of childish."

"*Skreee!* How dare you!"

Her face bright red, Beatrice fumed, pounding the branch in frustration. But as a sensible adult, Emilia couldn't let Beatrice's actions slide. Furthermore, Emilia might become the kingdom's next ruler. She would not yield an inch.

"Whoa there, you two. Leave it at that. You're scaring the flowers of the forest."

It was then that a mysterious person popped in suddenly to break up their fight. The black-haired boy reached a hand to Emilia and looked up at Beatrice in the tree. And even from the back, Emilia recognized him easily.

"Subaru?"

"Wrong, young lady. I'm not Subaru—I'm Cheshire Subaru!"

Cheshire Subaru spun around, held up a thumb, and gleamed his white teeth. He was undoubtedly Subaru. But upon closer glance, he did have cat ears coming out of the top of his head. And since he also had his human ears in their normal location, he had four ears. The effect was a little grotesque.

"Yikes… Why did such a deplorable person have to show his face here, I wonder?"

"If you don't like me, then back off, Beako. Just FYI, Cheshire Subaru is a phantom who pops up in random places. I can watch you go about your life from one good morning to the next."

"All day—how deplorable can you be?! You think you've *won*, I wonder?!"

With the words “I wonder… I wonder…” echoing behind her, Beatrice skillfully jumped off the tree branch and ran out of sight. After she was gone, Cheshire Subaru turned to Emilia and said, “Now I’ve gone and needlessly bullied another young girl. It’d be nice to taste defeat just once.”

“But I wasn’t finished scolding Beatrice yet. And those ears are ridiculous—I *know* you all are playing tricks on me. I’m getting angry.”

“And you’re very pretty when you’re angry— Eek! Ouch, stop pulling! You’ll rip them off!”

Taking her anger out on Cheshire Subaru, Emilia yanked on his cat ears. But what she thought were prosthetics were warm, soft, and properly attached to his head. As Emilia recoiled in shock, Cheshire Subaru fell to his knees, his eyes filling with tears.

“Look, I don’t know why you’re so pissed off, but if you keep screeching like that, everyone’ll be scared of you. A girl’s greatest weapon is to smile and playfully say, ‘*PWNED*!’”

“I didn’t quite understand that last part…but yeah, you’re right.”

If she responded only in anger, she would frighten everyone. Hearing the words directed at her made Emilia shrink in self-pity. Seeing this, Cheshire Subaru looked up, drew his brows together, and said, “Okay. Whenever you’re bummed out, you need to party. So I’ll bring you to a tea party!”

“A tea party?”

“You bet. It’s being held in the forest right now. A lively, loud, and mad-headed tea party!”

After an oddly worrisome invitation from Cheshire Subaru, Emilia followed him through the forest. A short walk brought them to a clearing with a small cottage. The cottage blended in with the trees, and in its garden, there was a big table set up for a large gathering of people. And the guests waiting there for the tea party were—

“Oh…hi, Cheshire Subaru. So you showed up.”

“Now this isn’t gonna feel like a funeral with just two guys in attendance…”

Two very depressed-looking boys—or rather, two Subarus with depressed-looking faces—were seated at the table. Met by the surreal tableau, Emilia forgot her malaise and blurted out in shock, “Th-three Subarus? Cheshire Subaru, what’s going on?”

“Don’t understand what you’re talking about, Emilia-tan. That’s Hatter Subaru and March Subaru. See the hat and the rabbit ears? That’s how you tell them apart.”

Emilia glanced over at the droopy pair, and sure enough, they each had the distinguishing hat and rabbit ears Cheshire Subaru mentioned. And with the cat-eared Subaru among them, it made no sense whatsoever.

As Emilia’s eyes swam in confusion, Cheshire Subaru slinked into a seat and shrugged at the two blank-eyed Subarus beside him. “C’mon, guys, don’t be so bummed. You invited a bunch of people, and nobody showed—that’s totally normal.”

“Yeah, but isn’t it also normal to hope that this time will be different? Maybe they couldn’t call because the connection was bad, and that’s why they’re late to RSVP.”

“Well, we did make it an overnighter that started yesterday. But if somebody did show up, I’d say, *It’s okay, you didn’t make us wait*—nice guy that I am, March Subaru.”

“Whoa, shut up, sexy.” “Ooh, I’m totally crushing on me.” “Is it finally my time? Will I finally get to taste what it’s like to be popular?”

The three Subarus looked up and jabbered nonsense at one another. The funeral-like atmosphere of the party vanished at once, replaced with a lively mood—it was surreal, really.

The lively, loud, and mad-headed tea party had objectively earned its title with flying colors.

“Ooh, that’s right! For you poor, sad, pitiful souls, I’ve actually brought you a guest today! It’s okay, clap for my epic play.”

“Who’s the guest? Lemme guess, you got our hopes up only to reveal you brought a bored Beako with you? You can’t fool us. We know you’re useless.”

“Well, Beako’s better than nobody. Okay! Let’s put a buttload of sugar in Beako’s tea and bet on how long she lasts before she blows her top! I bet five minutes!”

“As appealing as that sounds, you’re wrong, my dude. I brought a different, non-Beako girl today. And she’s *crazy* cute. She’s a walking oasis in the middle of the forest that will soothe our parched hearts—and her name is Emilia-tan!”

Bringing his spiel up to a crescendo, Cheshire Subaru pointed toward the forest. Hatter Subaru and March Subaru, their eyes glittering with anticipation, looked in that direction. However—

“Nobody’s there, dumbass!!”

Afraid of getting wrapped up in their madness, Emilia had run away long ago.

4

“I don’t know why, but I’m *really* tired…”

Emilia liked to think she was used to talking with Subaru…but *three* Subarus was a bit too much to handle. Though she felt guilty doing so, when she saw a chance to slip away from the tea party, she’d made a beeline for the forest.

Luckily, the forest exit was not too far from the Subaru Natsuki Mad Hatter Tea Party, so in a matter of minutes, Emilia’s mind and body were both rejuvenating under the shining sun.

“Besides, there’s a landmark that’s been very comforting to see.”

When Emilia got out of the forest, she saw her destination—a tall building that was just ahead. If Emilia wasn’t mistaken, it looked exactly like the castle in Lugunica’s royal capital.

Surely, there was somebody there who could help her. By then, Emilia didn’t feel any confusion over why she had fallen down a hole or what a castle was doing there. All she felt was a mysterious sense of duty and the maternal urge to give Puck a good spanking.

“I’ve arrived! Okay, I need to find someone to ask for help…”

Now at the foot of the castle, Emilia gave not even a passing glance to the spray of flowers in the garden surrounding the castle as her eyes darted to and fro in search of a person. Until—

“The trial! The trial is about to start!”

—a tiny cat darted across the flower bed, yelling loudly. It was Puck’s grand entrance, after his slam against the window and subsequent disappearance. He darted straight into the castle, without noticing Emilia.

“Puck again! And what trial? Ugh…now’s no time to play around!”

Her cheeks puffed over Puck’s cold shoulder, Emilia darted into the castle after him. The bright white light that met her as soon as she entered made her hands shoot over her face.

She timidly peered between her fingers. And the scene before her—

“Is this…a court?”

It was a spacious room with a ceiling so high that it couldn't be seen, and bleachers mounted all around the walls. The seats were packed with spectators, whose noisy murmurs took control of the space.

"Off with her head."

And in the center of the space was a girl with pink hair, coldly delivering the sentence.

She wore her usual maid's uniform, save her headpiece, which had been swapped out for a crown—it was Ram.

She gazed down on the witness stand without a trace of compassion. And the person seemingly on trial was—for some inexplicable reason—Beatrice. She was tied up, lying on her side, red in the face, and screaming.

"I d-demand a retrial! Is this tyranny, I wonder?! I was framed!"

"Off with her head."

"Is that the only thing you can say, I wonder?! You must be kidding me!"

Beatrice's pleas of not guilty and false charges fell on deaf ears—Ram was dead set on executing her. And beside her was a girl with blue hair—Rem. She touched her big sister's shoulder and said, "Um, Sister, couldn't you at least hear Lady Beatrice's side of the story? Besides, if it's the cookies you're worried about, I can always bake you some more."

"But I was so looking forward to eating the cookies you baked me, Rem. How will she atone for the humiliation I went through when they were stolen from me? I won't feel even slightly vindicated until I've beheaded the thief and used her skull as a cup."

"All over a silly cookie—a bit tyrannical, no?! You demon! You devil! You hell spawn!"

With each raging insult, Beatrice only added further crimes to her charge. With lèse-majesté to top it all off, her looming death sentence was palpable in the court. Unable to tolerate the sight of it any longer, Emilia cried out:

"Wait! Now, I don't care what she's done—you're being too hard on her!"

"What's this? Defending Betty, are we? What audacity! Defying Her Majesty Queen Ram, you conceited little brat. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Puck was the one who answered Emilia's plea with awfully servile responses. Given the gavel in his hand, it was probably safe

to assume he was the judge. He ordered Emilia to take the stand.

"I don't understand what's happened, but Beatrice is not that naughty. Cutting off her head is simply out of the question. What's come over you, Ram?"

"Impudent girl. How dare you address Ram with such familiarity. And if Lady Beatrice didn't steal Ram's cookies, then *who* did?"

"I don't *know* that… But I wonder what that sweet aroma permeating from this girl's mouth is? That's the impression I get from her."

"Beatrice?!"

Still tied up and lying on her side, Beatrice sold Emilia out even though she was trying to defend her on the witness stand. And in fact, Emilia did recall eating a cookie. She wanted to claim it was a gift from Clind, but the mood in the court immediately turned against her.

"Wait, wait, not so fast! I don't know why, but I've got a *really* bad feeling about this!"

"Well…I suppose if this girl genuinely is the thief, all she needed to do was sit back quietly and watch Beatrice's head fly. Yet she came forward… Guilty conscience got the better of you?"

"Won't you even entertain the possibility I'm *not* a thief?!"

Emilia's face went pale. At this rate, she would be found guilty. But a hand of mercy reached out to this pitiful defendant—it was the kind little sister who stood behind the icy queen.

"Sister, Sister, I really don't think that young lady is even capable of crime…"

"I see. Well, if you say so, Rem, then it very well may be true."

Rem's intercession finally got Ram to accept how irrational her argument was. As Emilia sighed in relief, narrowly escaping her predicament—

"That's right, it's pure nonsense—Emilia-tan could *never* be a criminal!"

"Cuteness is justice! Pretty girls are treasures! Emilia-tan is my waifu!"

"While we're at it, threaten Beako more and make her cry! Take her to the edge!"

One rowdy voice after another shot from the bleachers until all eyes turned to them. And sure enough, there were the three Subarus: cat-eared, rabbit-eared, and hatted. Apparently, the tea

party was over.

"Subarus, are you acquainted with this young lady?" Rem asked the three Subarus.

All three flashed their white teeth and said, "Yeah, she's an acquaintance!" "She's our tea-party friend!" "Let's just say *it's complicated*!"

"Is that so?" Ram gave their three replies a satisfied nod. Then with a glance at Emilia, she smiled lovingly—enough to make a person swoon—and made her decision.

"Off with her head."

"WHAAAAT?!"

"Very well. Off with her head, then."

"Hey! Hey, wait a minute! Guys, don't you think this is crazy?! What's come over all of you?!"

Flustered, Emilia pleaded her innocence, but Queen Ram and Prime Minister Rem ignored her completely.

The gavel loudly pounded on the platform, and a bunch of Pucks dressed as soldiers pushed themselves inside in a solid wall. Look right, look left—nothing but Pucks.

"Ah! Why're they *cute*?!"

Surrounded by these strange Pucks—some in armor, some dressed as gardeners, some as playing cards—Emilia tasted a mixture of terror and bliss.

"S-Subaru!"

"I just hope somebody uncovers the truth someday—that's our earnest wish."

"Subarus, you big dummies!"

"Pehhh!"

The three Subarus each stuck out their tongues as the herd of Pucks swallowed Emilia, who had no means of escape.

5

"___lia-tan… Emilia-tan, come on!"

"Mm—mm…"

Emilia woke to the sensation of someone shaking her shoulders and calling her name. Her long lashes quivered as she opened her eyes, blinking many times. Then she looked up and finally recognized the familiar face that was almost touching hers.

"…Subaru?"

“That’s right, it’s me. Dang, you scared me there. I went to your room to get you, but you weren’t there. Never thought you’d just fall asleep out here. You must’ve really been exhausted.”

As Subaru gave a little chuckle, Emilia finally woke all the way up. After a panicked glance at her surroundings revealed she was indeed back at Roswaal Manor, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank goodness…”

“Mm? What’s up? Wait, did you have a nightmare? I get it. Come on, fling yourself into my arms. Glomp me as long as you need to.”

“Sorry, I don’t quite follow what you’re saying.”

Subaru looked hurt, his arms still spread wide, and Emilia was only more confused.

She did think she had a dream, but she couldn’t remember what it was about. It just felt like a very stressful dream. So stressful that she truly was relieved to be back in the land of the wakeful.

“Well, anyhoo, I’m glad I found you. Let’s head back. It’s almost suppertime. I won’t tell anybody you ditched your afternoon studies. That’ll be our little secret.”

“Er…okay, thanks. I’ll be more careful next time.”

Subaru helped Emilia to her feet. Then she patted the grass off herself and stood tall. As she did so, she suddenly got the sense she needed to tell Subaru something.

“Subaru…I’ve got something to say.”

“Hmm, what is it?” Subaru asked, turning around.

After a moment’s thought, Emilia said, “If you ever throw a tea party…even if nobody else shows up, I promise I’ll come.”

“What made you imagine such a sad scenario?!” Subaru cried out. The sight of him made Emilia burst into laughter. And if anybody asked her why, this is how she would probably answer:

_____*I saw you looking lonely in Wonderland, Subaru.*

<Fin>

AFTERWORD

Hi, hellooo there, Nagatsuki speaking. Thank you so much for buying *Re:ZERO Short Story Collection*. Or if you're reading this (albeit short book) in a bookstore all the way to the very end… Well, I'm not sure whether to love or hate you for that!

A jumble of love and hate is an odd place to start from, but anyway, this was the *Re:ZERO Short Story Collection*.

Considering these are stories within the main story, they were invariably rather cutthroat, but I just wanted to show what the characters were up to in their everyday lives. Addressing that simple question and telling "cozy" stories I couldn't showcase in the main series would delight author and reader alike—these things are what makes this *Short Story Collection* good.

Some of the stories featured in this book were initially published in *Monthly Comic Alive*, and some are originals written just for this book. In *Monthly Comic Alive*, you can find monthly publications of diaries, subcharacter backstories, and the like, so I'd love it if you all checked that out, too.

Okay, I'm going to talk about the actual stories featured in this collection now, so for those of you who like to read the afterword first, beware of spoilers.

First, we have "A Heroic Epic Starting from Zero." This story features Liliana, a character who so far has only appeared in the short story collection, and it's also the only side story that fits right in between books in the *Re:ZERO* main story. In part due to Otsuka's amazing illustrations, Liliana turned into the ultimate

annoying but cute character, and this author likes her very much. She'll make an appearance in the main story eventually, so look out for her.

Then "The Head Maid's Restless Day of Rest" is an episode that shows how much the rest of Roswaal Manor relies on Rem. The rest of the cast divides into three teams to tackle the cooking, laundry, and dusting that she normally does every day. Through that, we learn about some of their unexpected aptitudes. And Ram, now able to envision the mansion coming to a complete standstill if Rem was to catch a cold, reflects upon how she treated her little sister.

Then the original story I wrote just for this book: "The Day I Stopped Being the Aldebaran Star." This outlines the events of Priscilla and Al's relationship leading up to the day before the royal selection begins in Volume 4. Priscilla's arrogant antics in the baronry and Lyp's nefarious reason for marrying her are highlights. Learning of the conspiracy, Al has to choose between his mistress (whom he hardly knows) or his own interests. Which will he choose —? Well, that's obvious, since this is a prequel. In the main series, Al is shrouded in mystery, so I thought I'd write a little episode where he has to deal with some encroaching darkness.

And lastly, we have a side story in the *Short Story Collection*: "Emilia in Wonderland." As I'm sure you can tell from the title, it's a parody of *Alice in Wonderland*. We have a cat playing a rabbit, and from certain casting choices, we see just how few friends Emilia has…and taking a bird's-eye view of it, it's kind of sad. But please don't read it that way.

Well, now that I've written plenty of lines, it's time to thank everyone like I always do.

First, Editor I, thank you for helping with the short story publication in *Monthly Comic Alive*. My monthly deadlines terrify me, but I'm living my dream—even more so now that it's in book form. Thanks in advance for everything you do.

And thank you to my illustrator, Otsuka, for yet another batch of gems. Liliana and Roswaal Manor in Wonderland were particularly wonderful.

And to my designer, Kusano, my sincerest thanks for drawing a cover illustration for this *Short Story Collection* that is of a different flavor than the main series.

Also, thank you to my proofreader, my manager, all the

bookstores—I am forever in your debt. If I may be so bold, thank you in advance for your help in the future.

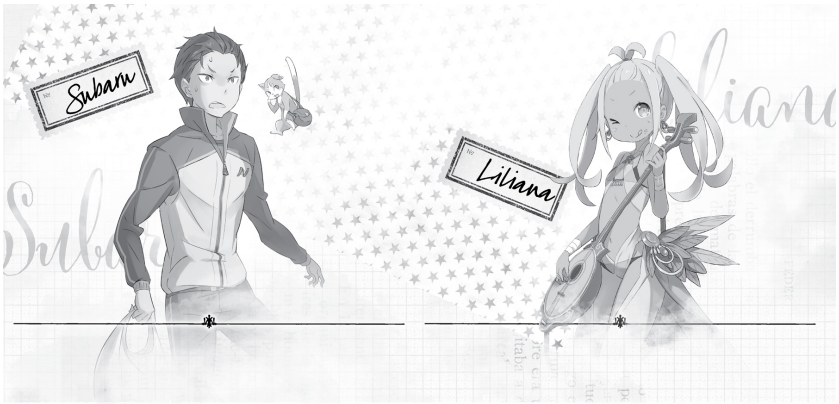
And lastly, to the one reading this book, thank you so much.

April 10, 2014

Tappei Nagatsuki

<<Stressing over whether to wear long sleeves or short>>

Magical Girl
LOLI★LIA
For "Emilia in Wonderland,"
I drew a slightly
younger-looking
Emilia. ☆
オツカ シンイチロウ
Shinichirou Otsuka


Subaru
Liliana

“Hey, chore boy! Chore boy! I’m not sure about the short stories, but rumor has it you don’t do much important stuff in the main story anymore and you’re only useful for previews! So here’s the preview! Now’s your time to shine, chore boy!”

“Why did you pop in here just to talk shit about the main character?! And just for your information, there wouldn’t *be* a main story without me, and everyone would meet a terrible demise, if we’re gonna be real.”

“The muse has spoken! I present to you my new song—‘I’m Butthurt.’”

“Shut up! I’m not butthurt, and nobody asked you anyway! Just do the damn preview!”

“Okaaaay! Then again…we’re supposed to actually give a preview for the next volume in the main story. We were gonna divulge a lot of the plans in between volumes, but by the time this short story collection gets published, the deadline for the next volume of the main series will probably already have passed… Oh! But don’t get me wrong! I’m not saying you’ve got bad timing, chore boy! It’s all a big misunderstanding.”

“I haven’t even said anything, dumbass! Don’t hurt yourself and then play victim! Ugh, just do the preview for the next volume of the main story, then.”

“Well, I *would* do the preview…except I’m not in the main story, so I barely know about it…”

“Then why are you even here?! Okay, *fine*, I’ll do it. Sooo… Volume 6 picks up where Volume 5 left off, with the start of the third loop, of course. In which Subaru uses Return by Death to devise a strategy to defeat this world’s most powerful enemy thus far… Anyway, that’s the gist of it.”

“—Our hero struggles with his self-worth and what he can do to help others. To protect the smile lingering in the recesses of his brain, Subaru Natsuki continues his resolute battle against fate. But the raging waves of fate laugh in the face of the boy’s courage, until he loses sight of the very first wish that he held dear…”

“Y-yeah, that’s right… Wh-where did all that come from?”

“The future he dreamed of mercilessly vanishes, and the boy stops dead in his tracks. However, the powerful force that takes his hand and gives his back a push is never far from him. *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-* reaches a tense climax in Volume 6—and it is there that the new heroic epic shall begin.”

“And that was our preview from a bard in a trance—coming to stores March 2015. Mark your calendars.”

“Phew… It is so tiring performing with a scene partner who doesn’t pull his own weight. I may not look it, but I’m kind of a mother hen! Mother hen!”

“Oh, shut the cluck up! I’m taking back my compliment!”

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink